THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE AMBIVALENT: AGENCY, IDENTITY, AND THE IRA WIFE IN CONTEMPORARY NORTHERN IRISH TEXTS

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The Good, The Bad, The Ambivalent: Agency, Identity, and the IRA wife in Contemporary Northern Irish Texts

by

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A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English, Faculty of Arts
Memorial University of Newfoundland

July 2006

St. John's Newfoundland

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-30455-6
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-30455-6

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Abstract

The metaphorically imprisoned IRA wife is a contemporary Northern Irish literary convention. Who is the IRA wife, and how does her characterization and function differ depending on the narrative in which she exists? Jim Sheridan's 1997 film *The Boxer*, Danny Morrison's novel *The Wrong Man*, and Anne Devlin's 1986 play *Ourselves Alone* all foreground a male-dominated Republican movement whose desire for political self-determination limits women's potential to achieve that same fundamental human right. In *The Boxer* the imprisoned IRA wife is a victim who eventually learns to stand up for herself; in *The Wrong Man* she is a dangerous commodity with the potential to destroy the IRA from within; and in *Ourselves Alone* she is purposely complex, impossible to classify with any sort of consistency. Whatever her function within a text, her existence and circumstances clarify, complicate and question existing conventions and expectations of Northern Irish female identity.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express sincere gratitude to Dr. Danine Farquharson, my dedicated and always helpful MA supervisor. Her support has been invaluable in completing my thesis. In addition, special thanks are due to Dr. Iona Bulgin for her help editing this document. I must also acknowledge the generous financial assistance of the Department of English at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family, specifically my parents, my sidekick David Knill, and my grandmother Elsie McSpadden for their continued support; I could not have completed this degree without them.

Introduction

Self-determination, the right to determine one's own fate or course of action without compulsion, lies at the heart of the Irish Republican agenda. As Raymond, the protagonist of Danny Morrison's 1997 novel *The Wrong Man*, explains to his often-skeptical wife Roisin, "I want a normal life, to be able to take you on holidays" (79). While his political involvement in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) leads to a restricted adult life spent in and out of prison, his ultimate goal is the right for him and his "nation" to gain the freedom to make decisions for themselves without the limiting, restrictive influence of the British government. In her article, "Self-Determination: The Republican Feminist Agenda," Claire Hackett notes that the concept of self-determination is equally central to the Irish feminist movement, specifically "self-determination as the right and ability to make real choices about our lives: our fertility, our sexuality [...] the means to be independent in all the areas in which we are currently denied autonomy and dignity in our various identities as women" (111). Women's identity, specifically the identities of women associated with the Irish Republican Army and IRA prisoners' wives, are what I will investigate in this thesis.

I assert that the metaphorically imprisoned IRA wife has become a contemporary Northern Irish literary convention. While aspects of her character, particularly suffering motherhood, are rooted in historically established literary conventions, I believe that her continuing and evolving persona deserves sustained analysis. Deeming her a subsection

of existing female literary conventions is not adequate. Simply stated, she has become a constant figure in Northern Irish literature, on film, and on stage, and deserves critical attention. Thus, the broad questions for this thesis are: who is the IRA wife, and does her characterization and function differ depending on the narrative in which she exists?

I will compare the representations of women who love IRA volunteers in three Northern Irish texts: Jim Sheridan's 1997 film *The Boxer*, Morrison's novel *The Wrong Man*, and Anne Devlin's 1986 play *Ourselves Alone*. All three foreground a male-dominated Republican movement whose desire for political self-determination is so strong that it limits women's potential to achieve these same fundamental human rights. Interestingly, in all three texts, a male IRA volunteer's literal imprisonment is juxtaposed with a less institutionalized, but equally confining, depiction of female incarceration. Each text presents at least one woman whose socially inscribed responsibilities to Republican nationalism are shown to outweigh her rights as a thinking adult woman: her confidence, her opinions, and even her reproductive decisions are compromised by her involvement with a volunteer.

At first glance, Sheridan, Morrison, and Devlin all chastise the Republican movement for its treatment of women.[1] In *Ourselves Alone*, Donna, the common-law

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[1] I address the issue of authorial intent in Chapters 2 and 3. However, it is important to note that while an extensive body of criticism exists debating the auteur theory in film studies (from Andrew Sarris's English introduction of the word "auteur" in "Notes on the Auteur Theory" to Pauline Kael's debate with Sarris in the pages of *Film Quarterly* to the 1990 special issue of *CineAction*, "Rethinking Authorship"), because Sheridan co-wrote and directed *The Boxer* I consider him to be the film's author.

wife of a volunteer, states, "we're all waiting on men" (16), and Raymond Massey, the protagonist of *The Wrong Man*, admits, "when it comes to women, all men are bastards" (30). In all three texts, women are expected to accept their uncomfortable social positions, bearing the brunt of a burden created by men. Even though they are portrayed alternately as either victims or betrayers, their opinions are often wise and highly rational; one gets the sense that if only they had some real say in the matter, the "Troubles" could have been cleared up long ago. On a simple level, the female characters in these texts are doing the best they can, stuck in a situation that they had no role in creating and little hope of improving.

When carefully considering the women of these texts it is essential to recall, as no doubt Sheridan, Morrison, and Devlin do, that within the context of Northern Irish studies a woman is generally much more than an actual woman. Throughout Irish literary history, archetypal female figures, personifying a wide range of political and religious movements and opinions, have held dominant positions of representation. As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford explains in one of the most recent summations, "the allegorical identification of Ireland with a woman, variously personified as the Shan van Vocht, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, or Mother Eire, is so common as to be rhetorically invisible" ("Thinking" 1). Cullingford proposes that there are two main reasons for employing these highly conventional, feminized characters: "as applied by men it has helped to confine Irish women in a straitjacket of purity and passivity; and as applied by English cultural imperialists it has imprisoned the whole Irish race in a debilitating stereotype"

(1). Cullingford's simple delineation between the differing utilitarian functions of these conventions is essential to analyzing the characterization of the imprisoned IRA wife in contemporary Northern Irish texts. It is my assertion that in the case of my three chosen texts, genre does not significantly change the basic gender stereotypes at work. Well-worn, over-determined literary conventions exist so that readers can immediately recognize them; however, stereotypes have radically different meanings depending on where and why they are employed.

Before outlining the critical history of the three texts examined in this thesis, it is first necessary to rationalize those textual choices. Jim Sheridan is one of the most internationally well-known Irish film directors. Born in Dublin in 1949, Sheridan began his creative career on the stage, co-founding Dublin's Project Theatre. He directed his first film, *My Left Foot*, in 1989. *My Left Foot* was successful and positively received: Daniel Day-Lewis and Brenda Fricker both earned academy awards for their performances. Beginning in 1993, Sheridan developed a trio of IRA-themed films: he directed *In the Name of the Father* (1993), produced and co-wrote *Some Mother's Son* (1997) with Terry George, and directed *The Boxer* (1997). Jim Sheridan is an artist clearly engaged in the politics of Northern Ireland and his films are stylistically and thematically complex. *In the Name of the Father* is about the 1974 Guildford pub bombing, and *Some Mother's Son* deals with the 1981 hunger strikes. The most contemporary of the three, *The Boxer,* is situated in Northern Ireland just prior to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Actor Daniel Day-Lewis plays Danny Flynn, a recently

released IRA prisoner (just like Raymond Massey in *The Wrong Man)*, who spent over a decade in jail for unspecified IRA activities. But unlike Raymond, Danny wants to leave his IRA involvement behind, preferring to concentrate on his youthful passion, amateur boxing. His true love is Maggie, the daughter of a prominent IRA official; however, even though they fell in love before his incarceration, during Danny's time away Maggie married his best friend, another IRA man, now himself imprisoned. Of course, when Danny and Maggie are reunited they realize that their feelings for each other have not changed. In the first scene of the film it is established that in the IRA community it is a cardinal rule that the wives of prisoners remain faithful. *The Boxer* is a love story inside the barricades, unfolding within one community.

The Boxer addresses the difficulty of maintaining a relationship within the political and social framework of the IRA, and clearly depicts the literal incarceration of men as parallel to the social-sexual incarceration of women. Even though Maggie claims that her marriage was over long before her husband's incarceration, she is not free to publicly pursue her feelings for Danny. In the end, their affair is discovered by Maggie's son, who is so hurt by what he perceives as his mother's betrayal of his jailed father that he informs on them to a local troublemaker who pulls the couple from a car and beats them. Maggie's powerful father intervenes, assassinating the ringleader of the angry mob, allowing Danny, Maggie, and her son to escape and continue pursuing their relationship and a non-political life. The potential for women inside the Republican

community to exert self-determination is a common link between *The Boxer* and *The Wrong Man*, a connection that will be explored in this thesis.

While neither Jim Sheridan nor Anne Devlin has public links to Irish Republicanism, Danny Morrison has never tried to hide his ties to the IRA. He is an IRA volunteer turned writer, now "preferring pen to sword" (Taylor 364). Born in Belfast in 1953, Morrison was interned in Long Kesh prison in 1972 and after his release became editor of the Sinn Fein newspaper *Republican News*. In 1978 he was charged with IRA membership and conspiracy to pervert the course of public justice. He defended himself in court and was granted bail. The charges were withdrawn in February 1979. In 1982 he was elected in Mid-Ulster to the Northern Ireland Assembly on an abstentionist ticket. He was national director of publicity for Sinn Fein from 1979 until his arrest in January 1990 in connection with the abduction of Sandy Lynch, an IRA informer, for which he served eight years imprisonment. Throughout the 1981 hunger strikes he was a spokesperson for IRA volunteer Bobby Sands MP, and during a crucial debate at Sinn Fein's annual conference later that year, he called for the party to embrace electoral politics and coined the phrase which was to sum up the Republican movement's strategy of going forward: "an armalite in one hand and a ballot box in the other" (Taylor 282).

As a "leading republican strategist and spokesperson" (Magee 202), Morrison's fictional representations of women and the IRA are provocative. In *The Wrong Man*, a title that could refer to various characters within the text, IRA man Raymond Massey is released from Long Kesh after a lengthy and unpleasant incarceration. He becomes

reacquainted with Róisín Reynolds, a woman from his past. The novel describes the difficulties that Raymond's political involvement causes in their relationship. Although the two eventually marry, they are torn apart by Raymond's dedication to the cause, and Róisín's inability to accept the impact his political devotion has upon her private life with him. The story ends in heartbreak and tragedy: Roisin eventually betrays him by sleeping with Tod, his young and ideologically weak protégé, the very man whose political betrayal ultimately leads to Raymond's death. The trajectory of Róisín's character from independent woman to sexual betrayer stands in contrast to Maggie in *The Boxer*. The polar opposite characterizations of the IRA wife in the film and the novel demand some third option: an option staged in Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*.

Anne Devlin, born to a Catholic family in Belfast, currently lives in Birmingham, England, but it was her experiences during a brief residency in Andersonstown, Belfast, that inspires much of her literary output. While she is best known for her first play, *Ourselves Alone*, her credits also include several other plays and television scripts, including a BBC series about a woman involved in the IRA, and the television adaptation of D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. As Lisa M. Anderson summarizes, "Anne Devlin, at this point, offers her audience an intimate look into the lives of women, particularly the Catholic women of Northern Ireland" (95). Devlin's work is influenced by second-wave feminism; Anderson makes it clear that Devlin's female characters' "refusal to accept the status quo without questioning it helps to illuminate their positions within the social and political conflicts within Northern Ireland" (95).

The title *Ourselves Alone* is the approximate English translation of Sinn Fein. As Ann Rea explains, "Devlin uses the English translation ironically to draw our attention to the women in the Republican movement, depicting them as 'alone' or isolated, but also as 'selves' who may dissent from the movement's ideology" (208). The play's three main female protagonists include two sisters, Josie and Frieda, as well as their brother Liam's common-law wife Donna. Like Maggie from *The Boxer*, all of the women are implicated in the IRA through family relationships: Malachy, Josie and Frieda's father, the grandfather of Donna's child, is an IRA leader. The women are different, yet all three struggle with their socially inscribed roles: Josie is a serious woman, an IRA volunteer entrusted with the storage and transportation of weapons, but has never been able to escape her father's influence; Frieda is a singer-songwriter with little regard for her father or his political cause, who eventually attempts to exile herself from the "Troubles"; and Donna is a patient, sometimes passive character who has given up everything, including her relationship with her young son, to be with the unfaithful, politically opportunistic Liam.

Ourselves Alone is dialogue driven. Because it is meant to be performed, much of the story is suggested through conversation rather than complex narrative. The active storyline revolves around Josie's sexual relationships, first with handsome, married IRA volunteer Cathal O'Donnell, then with Joe, a British IRA volunteer who eventually betrays her and her family by informing on them to the British government. However, more central to the story than the actual betrayal is the fact that just as her family is

beginning to realize the extent of Joe's treachery, Josie finds herself pregnant with his child. This pregnancy leads to intense discussions about gender, reproduction, and nationalism, culminating in Josie's apparent decision to submit to her father, allowing him to take ownership of her baby, and, therefore, her reproductive self-determination.

The three texts I have chosen to compare all offer important insights into Northern Irish women in contemporary literature, particularly when considered together. I used several criteria to focus the breadth of my search. First, within the broader topic of "Troubles" literature, I decided to use only texts about the conflict after the hunger strikes of the early 1980s, up to the late 1990s, and before the landmark Good Friday Agreement. My decision meant avoiding many texts centring on the events occurring during the 1916 Easter rising, the Anglo-Irish War, and the Irish Civil War up through the massive IRA restructuring of the 1970s, including Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* and Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*, but I believe it is justified by the complicated development of the movement. The terms IRA and the "Troubles" suggest different meanings depending on the historical context in which they are used; rather than discussing a fundamentally complex whole, I have decided to pursue a more focused study. My decision to limit my investigation to texts with a relatively contemporary setting made another significant decision for me: I would use only texts written within the past twenty-five years.

My primary texts are contemporary: *Ourselves Alone* (1986), *The Boxer* (1997), and *The Wrong Man* (1997) have inspired some scholarly attention, but are also recent

enough that there is still space for new discussion. Of my primary texts, only *Ourselves Alone* has garnered significant examination of its characterization of women. In fact, surprisingly little scholarly work has been published about the female characters in contemporary "Troubles" texts: James Cahalan's discussion of gender and the "Troubles" ends with Bernard MacLaverty's novel, *Cal* (1983). Similarly, the most recent texts discussed in Bill Rolston's article "Mothers, Whores, and Villains: Images of Women in Novels of the Northern Ireland Conflict" (1989) were published in 1987. Even in Ann Owens Weekes's article, "Figuring the Mother in Contemporary Irish Fiction" (2000), only one post-1990 text is mentioned.

Not only have there been surprisingly few scholarly examinations of women in contemporary "Troubles" literature, but some of the theoretical perspectives of previous critics are outmoded or tired. A significant number of past investigations relied on the categorical designation of "types" of Irish femininity, based on several ostensibly archetypal Irish women: images of the devouring sow, Mother Éire, and the suffering martyr all come into play. In 1980, Margaret Ward and Marie-Therese McGivern challenge the critical trend, stating "our contention is that none of these stereotypes reveal the true situation of women living in a socially deprived, war-torn, rigidly patriarchal society" (qtd. in Cahalan 224); however, the tendency prevailed, as illustrated by Rolston's oft-cited article. These categories encourage essentialist generalizations instead of more focused investigations of female characters. Too many critics simply fit female

characters into the existing critical framework rather than suggesting alternate methods of understanding the role of women in "Troubles" texts.[2]

As a result, potentially fruitful feminist concepts have not been sufficiently explored. Of interest is Moynagh Sullivan's "Feminism, Postmodernism and the Subject of Irish and Women's Studies," an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses that feminist and postmodern concepts could bring to the discussion of Irish femininity; however, Sullivan's discussion is broad, and never focuses on any individual text. Also, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews suggests the need for "a feminist practise of literary theory" in the study of women in "Troubles" literature in *(de)constructing the North: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969* (2003); however, his research differs from mine in that his investigation focuses mainly on the representation of the "Troubles" *by women*, while two of my primary texts are by men. Also, his discussion of women in "Troubles" literature is just one aspect of his effort to apply anti-essentialist thought to contemporary Northern Irish literature as a whole. While his chapter about women is insightful, it is by no means all-encompassing. There is ample space, indeed a demonstrated need, to investigate the way that the women who love paramilitary men are characterized in contemporary Irish "Troubles" texts.

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[2]Both Heather Zwicker and Laura Lyons go a long way in addressing this imbalance in *Reclaiming Gender: Transgressive Identities in Modern Ireland*, edited by Marilyn Cohen and Nancy Curtin, and published in 1999.

Of the challenges I faced choosing my texts, the question of author gender was the most difficult, but since my specific topic, female incarceration, is so fundamentally gendered, I feel obligated to address it here in the introduction – a delicate and difficult task. At the outset of my research I knew that my decision about the gender or genders of my chosen authors *mattered*. Within the context of contemporary Northern Irish literary studies, there does seem to be a tendency to segregate female- and male-authored texts. For example, in Patrick Grant's *Literature, Rhetoric and Violence in Northern Ireland, 1968-98: Hardened to Death*, the only significant discussions of female-authored texts are confined to one chapter entitled "Shoot the Woman First." Similarly, in *(de)constructing the North*, Kennedy-Andrews dedicates the concluding section of his book to the broad subject of "Women's Writing," having included only one female author in his extensive discussions of popular fiction, liberal humanism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism. Even within critical responses to Northern Irish literature I noticed the sort of enclosure or containment of women that I planned to investigate in three fictional texts; as evidenced by these, and other examples within Northern Irish studies, a female author's gender may have a potentially ghettoizing effect. After making that observation, I stress that there are many critical analyses of Northern Irish literature that are much less divisive in their approach: *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, and Theories*, edited by Liam Harte and Michael Parker, which presents collected essays without any categorization is one example. I tried to be equally inclusive when selecting my three texts: I have chosen *The Boxer*, *The Wrong Man,* and *Ourselves Alone* not because of the

genders of their authors, but because, in them, the convention of the imprisoned IRA wife is manipulated to achieve three different narrative and ideological outcomes.

The three texts I will analyze cohere because of their divergent use of similar images and conventions, most specifically the imprisoned IRA wife. I have deliberately decided to work with a novel, a film, and a play in order to test my hypothesis that genre does not significantly change the basic gender stereotypes at work. And yet, all three texts have fascinating differences as well. Thus, in Chapter 1 I will discuss *The Boxer*. I decided to use Sheridan's text to introduce the imprisoned IRA wife because Sheridan links literal male incarceration and metaphorical female incarceration most insistently. Of the main female characters in all three texts, Maggie is probably the most innocent, a victim of circumstances outside her control. For Sheridan, the imprisoned IRA wife seems to stand in for a larger victimized group within the Northern Irish conflict: those who want peace, but are intimidated by a vocal/violent community. Sheridan emphasizes the prison-like atmosphere of Maggie's life; her family navigates their neighbourhood through a series of passageways, and her every move is highly monitored as even the daycare where she works is subject to the pervading eye of surveillance cameras. When it eventually becomes clear that the hatred within the IRA community has not only compromised Maggie and Danny's relationship but also threatens young Liam, they realize they must confront the oppressive forces in their community. Within Sheridan's view, active resistance is essential. Peace is only possible through the rejection of sectarianism in favour of love and family.

In Chapter 2 I will examine Morrison's use of the imprisoned IRA wife in *The Wrong Man*. Like Maggie, Róisín is not an ideal prisoner's wife; however, her rejection of her socially inscribed role is more aggressive. Her tangential belief in the ideals of Republicanism is subsumed by her desire for a happy, safe life with Raymond. She resists the limitations under which her position as "Raymond Massey's wife" place her. Rather than bearing her burden, her own little piece of the collective suffering of British-ruled Ireland with the steadfastness expected of her, she allows her individual desires to overpower her nationalistic duty. Here, the "imprisoned" IRA wife betrays her husband, and nation, both ideologically and sexually. Róisín is the female equivalent of Morrison's "wrong man," the self-serving and disloyal volunteer, Tod. The message seems to be that the stoic "imprisoned" IRA wife understands that her suffering existence is essential to the success of the Republican movement; the woman who resists her imprisonment, who puts her own rights or desires ahead of a "united Ireland," is as disruptive and dangerous a force as any British soldier.

In Chapter 3 I will analyze the function of the imprisoned IRA wife in Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*, and compare it to the other two texts. *Ourselves Alone* is an indictment of IRA anti-feminism: all of Devlin's republican men are hopeless, too self-centred to notice the pain they cause "their" women. Within that context, the imprisoned IRA wife/girlfriend/lover is not the iconic nationalistic symbol she is in *The Wrong Man.* Rather, she represents a major failing of the Irish Republican movement: a lack of respect for women's identities and abilities. The men of the text are as territorial about "their"

women, particularly their sexuality and reproductive rights, as they are of Ireland. By creating diverse women, and placing them in dialogue with each other, Devlin challenges the restrictive limits of conventional Republican symbolism, emphasizing the complexity and non-fixity of Northern Irish femininity.

While her regular presence in contemporary Northern Irish "Troubles" narratives suggests she has become a conventional figure, the imprisoned IRA wife can be manipulated to convey remarkably different meanings, depending on the ideological aims of the text in which she appears. Because Jim Sheridan's text argues for activism his use of the visual medium of film is appropriate. Maggie must look her oppressors in the eye – much like Danny faces his opponents in a boxing ring. Even though she is framed by the camera and the screen, Maggie's choice to decide her own fate is presented as an ocular function: eye to eye, she stands up for herself and her family. Danny Morrison's IRA wife, Róisín Reynolds is enclosed in the narrative boundaries of the realist novel. Despite the proliferation of Northern Irish novels that parody, mimic and satirize the conventions of realism, [3] *The Wrong Man* resists what Gerry Smyth refers to as an Irish feeling that the novel "was inadequate to the task of representing the nation" (25). Morrison's novel depicts the independent-minded woman as dangerous to the IRA's nationalist agenda and so his characterization of Róisín limits and destroys her self-

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[3]See Linden Peach's survey of contemporary Irish novels that disrupt the ideological bourgeois logic of realist novels in "Interruptive Narratives" from his book *The Contemporary Irish Novel: Critical Readings* (Palgrave, 2004).

determination. The performative medium of *Ourselves Alone* matches Devlin's desire to not only depict many female voices but also to put such voices into play. The importance Devlin's text places on voice and agency synchronizes with the theatrical space of her action.

The IRA wife's various significance in *The Boxer*, *The Wrong Man*, and *Ourselves Alone* emphasizes her flexibility: in Sheridan's film she is a victim who eventually learns to stand up for herself; in *Ourselves Alone* she is a dangerous commodity, with the potential to destroy the IRA from within; and in *Ourselves Alone* she is purposely complex, impossible to classify with any sort of consistency. Though her function within a text can be variable, her recurrence is noteworthy; her specific situation and experience clarifies, complicates, and questions existing conceptions of Northern Irish female identity.

Chapter 1

Eye to Eye: Panopticism, Power, and the Imprisoned IRA Wife in *The Boxer*

In *The Boxer*, Jim Sheridan creates an intensely claustrophobic Republican community, a place where no individual action goes unnoticed, and no transgression goes unpunished. Sheridan's West Belfast is a multi-layered panoptical prison where the British watch the IRA, the IRA watches the family, and the family (father Joe and son Liam) watch Maggie, the prisoner's wife. The IRA wife, a fertile Republican symbol, receives the strictest surveillance of all: Maggie's everyday life is subject to the same sort of restrictions that might apply to an IRA prisoner, including physical containment and limits on freedom of association. Further, Sheridan draws his viewer into Maggie's own paranoid existence. *The Boxer* is written, directed, and filmed to elicit an uncomfortable sense of confinement and surveillance in its viewer. Long, high-angle shots of the community taken from ever-present, humming helicopters imply the policing eye of the British army; local volunteers look over their shoulders at anyone who passes the West Belfast border, a second line of observation after the official British one at the checkpoint; and, several times Sheridan forces the viewer to adopt Maggie's point of view, watching the grainy surveillance screens positioned to monitor the local community centre. Clearly, Sheridan's viewer is meant to identify with Maggie's captivity. The viewer sees Maggie censor herself, even to the extent of sending her lover Danny away, fearing the violence that underlies the penetrating gaze of her community; however,

eventually she realizes that her obedient self-regulation contributes to her continued domination. Sheridan's film asserts that many people are in essentially the same position as Maggie, the "imprisoned" IRA wife: unhappy with a situation, but too intimidated to stand up for what is, within the moral structure of *The Boxer* at least, so obviously "right." Her struggle to free herself from both a dominating community, and a self-destructive acceptance of imposed social constraints, is an object lesson: she stands up for herself, and stands in for the people who, in Sheridan's words, are "giving up violence" (Barton 147). She is no longer willing to be pushed around, ultimately choosing to look her former wardens directly in the eye.

Ironically, *The Boxer* has had troubles catching the eye of the viewing public and critical audiences alike. It did less well at the box office and has only a fraction of the critical attention solicited by Sheridan's other "Belfast" films, *In the Name of the Father* and *Some Mother's Son*. Most of the critical responses to *The Boxer* take the form of reviews published in general interest newspapers and magazines. Many of the reviews are positive, but not effusively so; as Richard Williams of *The Guardian* explains, *The Boxer* "may simply be a very good film, rather than a great one" (5). Indeed, various reviewers seem to struggle with the film's right to exist, questioning whether it is really justified; several commentators, including its own co-writer Terry George, ask, "can you take another film about Northern Ireland?" (Williams 7). The answer? "You can. You will" (Williams 7). While some reviewers admit they had reservations about the film before seeing it, most agree that it does something that previous "Troubles" films have

not; in *The Sunday Times*, Eoghan Harris declares it "the first balanced film on Northern Ireland for almost 15 years, and a model of how to meld politics and drama that film-makers tackling Northern Ireland have too often ignored."

Joseph Moser presents one of the more in-depth analyses of *The Boxer* in his article "Fighting Within the Rules: Masculinity in the Films of Jim Sheridan." Moser's main premise is that in *The Field*, *In the Name of the Father*, and *The Boxer*, Sheridan "seeks to reclaim Irish masculinity from a heritage of patriarchal violence [... tracing] a path away from the endemically violent masculinity that has stereotypically defined Irish identity" (89). In his argument, Moser focuses on the representation of the family, the father in particular, suggesting that within the community men must decide which father-figure they ought to accept. Moser suggests that Ike, Danny's childhood boxing trainer, represents "the good-father," hoping to reach community children through his non-sectarian boxing club, while Harry "continues to influence the younger generations of Belfast with "guns and rhetoric" (93). What is interesting in Moser's argument is that a choice does exist. Moser places intense significance on Ike, suggesting that he "functions as an agent of change" (93). Moser reads Ike's death, the scene where Liam cradles his battered body as British soldiers converge upon them, as a major turning point, the moment when Liam "chooses his ideological alignment and subsequently accepts Danny, Ike's disciple, as a father figure" (93). As Moser explains, in *The Boxer* "Sheridan constructs a viable alternative mode of masculinity in which individual experience and conscience contribute to a vision of the future rather than a perpetuation of the destruction

of the past. His work exposes the weakness of violent men and the strength of the peaceful" (96). For Moser, *The Boxer* presents a possible alternative to violence, a model for advancement.

Moser's analysis of *The Boxer* is quite positive; however, Ruth Barton's chapter "*The Boxer*: The Performance of Peace," part of *Jim Sheridan: Framing the Nation*, takes a different approach to the film. While Moser sees *The Boxer* as a cinematic move towards peace, Barton contends that it contributes little to the search for a way out of violence. Probably the most authoritative critic of Sheridan's films, Barton suggests that due to a number of flaws *The Boxer* falls short of its potential. One of the most interesting problems that Barton notes is the clash between the film's two primary generic models: the boxing film and the "Troubles" film. As she explains,

> if [...] the point of a boxing film is to explore the obsessive nature of sporting commitment and to question the demarcation between the spectacle of violence and its enactment in the everyday articulation of masculinity, then *The Boxer*, by its nature a "Troubles" film, can only partly accede to generic expectations. (110)

While adopting convention only to break it can be an engaging artistic device, Barton suggests that in *The Boxer* Sheridan's manipulation of genre leads to confusion: "what, then, is the film's message" (110)? Barton suggests that the film's "political confusions" could also reflect the sense of instability that marked the period of its production. She explains that "on a symbolic level [*The Boxer*'s] inability to achieve a convincing narrative closure reflects the film's own anxieties about the feasibility of the peace

process" (106). Barton implies that while the end of the film is symbolically attractive, with the death of dangerous Harry, and the reunion of Danny and Maggie, it cannot stand up to the difficult realities of mid-1990s Belfast. As Barton suggests, the "political uncertainty" (122) that permeates *The Boxer* and other "Troubles" films can be attributed to the shaky political background from which they arise. Barton concludes that these fears and uncertainties "feed into and disrupt Sheridan's idealistic vision, resulting in a work that is beset by contradictory impulses to the point of failing to achieve any sense of closure" (122).

Interestingly, neither Moser's nor Barton's critical analysis have much to say about Maggie. Her character has endured some criticism within the popular press; Paul Power writes that "Watson's character [British actor Emily Watson plays Maggie], unfortunately, appears underwritten and she never seems to get fully into the role" (17). I disagree, but there is no doubt that for much of the film Maggie's main method of communication is through silence and body language. Both Moser and Barton seem to interpret Maggie as a marginal character, preferring to focus on Danny's boxing over his and Maggie's relationship. Yet Sheridan admits that "here the love story serves mainly as a vehicle for the examination of social and political issues" (Crowdus 3). Even if Maggie is ill-defined as a specific character, her symbolic value is significant. At one point in her discussion of the film, Barton does make an insightful comment about Sheridan's female characters. She maintains, as I do, that "the opening sequences establish beyond a doubt that the status of the prisoners' wife is little different to that of her incarcerated husband"

(105). Yet, that one statement constitutes the extent of her discussion about Sheridan's treatment of prisoners' wives.

Sheridan introduces West Belfast with an extreme long-shot, the camera adopting the elevated view of the ever-present helicopters whose chopping presence punctuates many of the film's most important moments. The target of the helicopters' interest is a wedding party, celebrating the union of a young woman and an imprisoned volunteer. The two have been married in a short, and remarkably perfunctory, prison service. The establishing shot of the neighbourhood demonstrates the near total erosion of any sort of conventional public/private dichotomy within the republican community; any event, no matter how ostensibly "personal," such as a wedding or a funeral, represents a potential goldmine of useful political intelligence. Aside from gaining potentially important information about the republican community, the constant droning presence of the helicopters offers another martial bonus: psychological damage is wreaked on the men, women, and children who suffer from interrupted sleep and a never-ending sense of observation. As Spurgeon Thompson notes, "at crucial personal moments [...] Sheridan and George show the way that such personal, intimate, or interior moments are folded outwards by the watching helicopter's presence" (104). Thompson goes on to argue that the helicopters distract characters from their own "inner life" (104). Even their most personal moments are compromised, politicized, by their constant awareness of being watched.

In *The Boxer*, the actions of both the IRA and the British army invite a distinctly Foucauldian approach to representing power within West Belfast: the disciplinary eye of *Discipline and Punish* becomes the primary tool to enforce community standards. Potentially dangerous situations are quashed before they begin, as the community is held secure by its constant sense of being watched by a judgemental, potentially violent eye. As I suggest in my introduction, there are several levels of restrictive surveillance at play within Sheridan's republican neighbourhood. First, its architecture assists watching eyes, a common feature of lower-income housing. There is no truly private space as entire levels of apartments share open patios running the length of the building. At any point intruders or camera lenses could be positioned directly outside one's door, looking in the windows, seeing who enters one's ostensibly personal space. All of the apartments reflect across an open court, facing a mirror image of themselves, window to window. At night, when the lights are turned on, an open curtain renders a home an illuminated stage. There are no backyards or tall trees in this housing project (most likely designed by some British civil engineer). The space is designed for penetrability. The massive open square offers little privacy: its wide open space actually assists the powerful searchlights of patrolling helicopters, making it difficult for anything to happen without British notice.

West Belfast is thus portrayed as a working version of Jeremy Bentham's famous panoptical prison: "in short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather three of its functions-to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide [...] Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap"

(Foucault 3). The architecture of visibility that characterizes the neighbourhood is meant to render it, and the IRA cell inside, more visible to the British army. Ironically, the measures that are meant to discourage IRA activity actually help the local cell to maintain intelligence/control of the patrolling British, and, more importantly, their own community; thus, a second panoptical level emerges. Lastly, the IRA employs several modes of surveillance that have operational functions beyond merely protecting themselves from the British: the community centre where Maggie works is monitored night and day by a series of cameras; there is always a volunteer standing near the barrier to East Belfast, noting all border-crossings; and, in an ingenious attempt to avoid the prying gaze of the British, many of the apartments in the complex are connected through a set of tunnels, creating both a safe walkway for IRA leaders such as Joe, and another mode of surveillance, compromising the privacy of even the most domestic space. Joe and his entourage of volunteers walk through living rooms and bedrooms, making small talk with the residents, including a little boy who seems entirely unfazed by the parade that walks right through his house. These multiple, multi-layered methods of internal control instill a sense of paranoia in the community. With no more warning than a knock on the wall, the entire upper-echelon of the local IRA could invade one's personal space. Foucault's analysis of power in *Discipline and Punish* is revealing in this context of invasion:

> Power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon.

> Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. (4)

While the constant possibility of a knock on the wall would probably encourage careful housekeeping, the psychological consequences of such a lack of privacy are substantial: there is no place for subversion within this system.

Of course, the symbolism of having the IRA in one's bedroom can also have specifically intimate significance. While British helicopters invade the personal lives of everyone in the community without distinction, inside the pub where the wedding celebration is held, a more discerning eye prevails. Even beyond the visual range of the British, behind the closed doors of the pub, there is sense of a distinction between the private and the public, or political, this time directed specifically at the prisoners' wives. Within the community's ideal model of politicized privacy, the prisoner's wife holds a special symbolic status. While many communities probably would not rejoice to see one of their own marrying a man in jail, within Sheridan's West Belfast no decision could be more lauded. As Joe assures the predominantly female wedding party, after the prisoners are let out, after the British finally leave, "you, you women that stood by your man will be remembered as the bravest of the district."[1] As paintings of Bobby Sands and the rest of the martyred hunger strikers look on, Maggie's father and the community at large use her earlier marriage to Tommy as a propaganda tool. She and son Liam are literally poster

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[1]All quotations from *The Boxer* are from the DVD edition, released in 1998.

children for the "support our prisoner's family" cause: the front of a brochure shows the two of them, pale-faced and grim, looking forlornly through a prison-like iron fence. During the wedding celebration, Joe uses his congratulatory address to the bride to reiterate his ex-prisoner status, emphasizing his family's continued support of "the cause." He dramatically recalls,

> while I was inside it was easy to do my time because I'd a strong woman behind me. My wife Eileen, god rest her soul, stood by me and remained faithful to the cause. And now my daughter, with her brave son Liam, keeps the house together until her husband Thomas returns.

Within Sheridan's West Belfast it is clear that loyal Republicanism starts at home. While there is some grumbling dissent among the volunteers, Joe and his family's faithful Republicanism reflects well upon him and his leadership.

Maggie's status as prisoner's wife is also part of Joe's political and cultural capital. Joe explicitly links female sexual chastity with political loyalty, a nationalist convention that is by no means limited to Northern Irish discourse. While, with obvious exceptions, women have tended to play less active roles in nationalistic rebellions, their contribution to "the cause" is often figured in terms of sexual and biological essentialism: "as national emblems, women are usually cast as mothers or wives and are called upon to literally and figuratively reproduce the nation" (Loomba 219). As Fiona Becket and David Alderson suggest, within the context of Irish studies "both colonial ideology and nationalist movements have promoted feminised concepts of the nation" so much that "it

has become difficult to read cultural representations of Irish womanhood without reference to this tradition" (61). Images of Mother Ireland, a loyal maternal figure, and Cathleen Ní Houlihan, a proud, unbending warrior-woman, are stock metaphorical characters within the Irish nationalist canon, perfectly loyal models of femininity. As Ann Owens Weekes writes, "while such portrayals might appear to suggest that Irish women [are] regarded with affection, even importance, in the social realm, they [are] in fact indicative of an appropriation of women's bodies in the interests of nationalism, with a corresponding discursive ellision of the lived experience of actual Irish women" (104). For all his praise, Joe's speech to the assembled prisoners' wives also contains an ominous warning: the loyal prisoner's wife is essential to the success of the IRA, and any sexual infidelity is the ultimate sin, betraying not only the cuckolded husband, but the community at large. In his *National Review* article about the film, John Simon indicates that the wives of prisoners must "abide by the exaggerated abstinence strictly enforced so as to maintain the morale of jailed husbands" (67), but in reality the strict rules concerning prisoner's wives do much more than quiet the suspicions of jealous husbands. As Cullingford argues, "if incarceration suggests impotence, an unfaithful wife evokes emasculation, and an army marches on its masculinity" ("Prisoner's Wife" 8). When an IRA volunteer notices that a young man at the wedding reception is too friendly with the very young-looking wife of a prisoner, the flirtatious man is forcefully removed from the scene of his crime and warned that next time he is seen with a prisoner's wife someone

will "shoot both your kneecaps off." Any threat to the chastity of a prisoner's wife is equated as a threat to the success of the Republican movement.

There are several instances in Irish literature and film where a female who steps outside socially inscribed sexual boundaries receives intensely physical punishment. Many Irish and Northern Irish texts, including Jennifer Johnston's novel *Shadows on our Skin* and David Lean's film *Ryan's Daughter*, include scenes of communal punishment involving the physical desecration and injury of a Catholic woman who has broken sexual rules: an angry crowd might shave her head, cover her in tar and feathers, or leave her tied up in a town square, naked and humiliated. The elaborate, communal punishment that some women receive for making the "wrong" sexual decisions, usually involving a British soldier or Protestant boy in a "love across the barricades" scenario, is reminiscent of that inflicted upon Damiens the regicide described by Foucault in the chapter "The Body of the Condemned" in *Discipline and Punish*. While the offending women are not usually killed, they are punished in a way that devastates the human body, through hurt and humiliation: their punishment is spectacle. But there is a difference in the way that the disgraced female at the wedding is punished. The fact that Sheridan decides to punish her through the disapproving eye of her community is a noteworthy panoptical development. At the wedding, the young woman who allows a man, who is not her husband, to flirt, does not receive the same physical threats as the male transgressor; rather, the scornful looks she receives from the other party guests (men, women, and

children alike) are punishment enough. Her actions have been viewed and noted by the public and as a result, she will probably be watched more closely in the future.

Visual confinement is a less noticeable mode of discipline than a public desecration. Paranoia can infect an individual without his or her notice, spreading until it becomes an overwhelming presence. *The Boxer* stealthily incorporates the viewer into the same claustrophobic environment as Maggie. Notwithstanding, the viewer's first glimpse of Maggie's community is from above, as a helicopter monitors guests arriving at the wedding reception, Sheridan replaces the initial high-angle shot with a medium-shot representing the same temporal moment, now shot at Maggie's level; as Thompson notes, "we move from seeing to being seen, from intruding, to being intruded upon" (104). Maggie's initial glimpses of Danny after he returns to the community are also filmed with contrasting shots. Her first look at him is as part of the community. As he breaks down the bricks that have been piled in front of the door of his flat, she and the entire community watch in near silence. While Maggie has had no contact with Danny, her neighbours cast loaded looks in her direction. The camera shots are impersonal, medium-shots allowing the viewer to get a clear look at characters' expressions, and at Maggie's discomfort. But, there is a difference in the way Maggie's second look at Danny is conveyed. As she works in the daycare at the community centre she glances up at the surveillance cameras only to see him coming through the gates; in this shot, the viewer shares the exact same view of Danny as Maggie does. We see him through her eyes and realize the danger that his return poses. Just as she sees him through the lens of a camera,

his presence could result in more rigorous monitoring for her. A tortured look flits across her face, but she must gain control of herself quickly because he is almost immediately outside the window of her classroom. They are keenly aware of each other's presence, but are scared to look. The shot through the glass is reminiscent of the thick panes through which prisoners must greet their visitors; it is uncomfortable for Danny and Maggie because, as the viewer eventually learns, during his incarceration he never accepted visits from her. The glass acts as a tangible symbol of the distance between them; the structure, both physical and social, of their neighbourhood separates them, rendering all of their attempts to see each other highly visible.

Joe and the IRA use surveillance as a mode of power. Indeed, in the next scene, Joe uses Danny's "approach to the community centre" as a method of gauging Maggie's emotions about his return. As they sit across the table from each other, Joe slowly and deliberately asks Maggie for her opinion of Danny's request to reopen the boxing gym. The camera, now representing Joe's prodding stare, catches all Maggie's uncomfortable grimaces and movements as she tries to steady herself; she understands that she is being tested just as the viewer does. When she fails to supply an adequate response, Joe watches her intently as he raises a coffee cup to his lips. Her returned glance is shot from directly behind her head, almost suggesting that the viewer is looking over her shoulder, similarly judged by Joe's loaded gaze. There is no mistaking the underlying warning of his look: as he later tells Maggie, "you've got to be above reproach." Despite her father's warning, Maggie pursues contact with Danny, still cognizant of the extent of the risk to

which she exposes herself. She decides to confront him at work, desperate to understand why he refused to correspond with her during his time in prison. They speak briefly in an alleyway before moving to the safer location of a dingy café at a train terminal. It is a relevant setting: the possibility of escaping from Belfast does exist.

Sheridan's decision to allow his viewer to look through Maggie's eyes, to adopt her paranoia, is meaningful. As I have already established, everyone in Sheridan's West Belfast is subject to some form of surveillance, so why is her situation significant? How does sharing her situation as "imprisoned" IRA wife help the viewer understand the meaning of the film? There is no doubt that *The Boxer* is a didactic film. Ruth Barton describes the film as "a statement, a call to foresake political violence for constitutional politics and for a return to a non-sectarian community life based around certain shared pleasures, such as sport" (115), I believe that Sheridan's message is more personal. Joe's work to broker a peace deal with the British does reflect Barton's statement, in the broad context of *The Boxer* institutional change is secondary to the personal development of the individual. Sheridan himself explains that the main idea he was hoping his audience might take away from the film is "we have to get past this violence" (Crowdus and Leary 14). In that sense Danny seems a fitting site for audience identification; he is an ex-prisoner who has given up sectarian fighting for the ordered forum of the ring. He is "a new model for the way things could work" (Crowdus and Leary 13). Even as he and Maggie continue to meet, confirming their deep, and potentially dangerous, feelings for each other, Danny is unconcerned. His attempts to imitate normalcy are almost painful.

Maggie watches him incredulously as he carefully prepares a coffee while they sit, exposed, in the front window of a café. Danny cheerfully tinkles his spoon against his cup, and he seems untroubled by the possibility that they could be seen together. Danny, the titular "boxer" of *The Boxer*, is framed as a hero. He is "the classic existential loner, a familiar archetype of Hollywood cinema" (Barton 110), more of a universal symbol than a tangible role model; if he represents an ideal, then it is Maggie, the heavily monitored, highly restricted IRA wife, who serves as a practical model for change. As Barton explains, "mainstream film-making practises are generally unable to analyse political issues in any great depth and rely on conveying ideological points of view through their symbolic human relationships" (171). Whether or not her situation has anything in common with that of an actual IRA wife, within the context of Sheridan's film she is the ultimate oppressed victim of the "Troubles". While at first Maggie seems annoyed with Danny's apparent naïveté, she soon realizes that there is courage behind his steadfast determination to live a "normal" life in Belfast. His positive effect on her goes far beyond the emotions that they hold for each other: he is an outsider who, aware of his marginalized position, decides not to be intimidated into passive acceptance. As Danny resurrects the boxing club, offering some of the most troubled youth in Belfast a non-sectarian outlet, Maggie slowly begins to realize that things could change; perhaps a desire for "normalcy" in West Belfast is not as outrageous as she first believed.

Yet, in the surveillant context of Sheridan's West Belfast, normalcy is relative. For a while Maggie and Danny choose to meet outside of their community, seeking a

"safe place" to be together, playing at being together, without making any potentially life-changing commitments. Improbably, in an attempt to avoid the prying eyes of Harry and his unit, they even venture across the "peace" line into Protestant East Belfast, a dangerous act for a former prisoner and the daughter of an IRA leader. As Maggie and Danny sit in the attractive park-like setting of the Protestant neighbourhood, they are reminded that simply leaving West Belfast does little to solve their problems: an ex-boxing opponent of Danny's comes up to warn them that they are not safe. A car of Unionist thugs watches them, a malevolent mirror to the IRA men that monitor their hasty return to West Belfast. The scene makes it clear that there is no privacy available to them: Danny and Maggie's trip across the border is noted on both sides, and even results in a newspaper article, entitled "Former IRA Man Crosses Peace-line." Several warning shots fired through Danny's window sends a clear message: he and Maggie will not be allowed to continue their secretive relationship.

Danny is not swayed by the condemnation of his community; after he and Maggie share an intense, yet chaste, afternoon at the beach, he makes a late night visit to her door. Both of them are obviously frustrated by the current state of their relationship. Danny, certain of their love for each other wants to "come out" to the community, urging Maggie, "be with me." Yet, as clear as it is that Maggie loves him, she resists his advance. As he enters the foyer of her house, she whispers, "you shouldn't be here [...] it's not safe." This scene makes explicit the fact that in *The Boxer* interior space is not necessarily safe, with houses and apartments forming labyrinths and knocks coming on the walls in the

dead of night; however, the institutional eye of the IRA is not the only watching threat. "Liam is upstairs," warns Maggie, as she and Danny attempt to control their physical attraction to one another. It is too late; even though Maggie and Danny never even kiss each other, to Liam, watching from the top of the stairs, it is clear that his mother has a new man in her life. Liam's situation is interesting because, beyond the boyish fear that his mother might abandon him, his negative reaction is also influenced by his ideological upbringing. As Sheridan explains, "the film crosses from the politics into the personal and becomes [...] a family story, which is what the Greeks understood [...] that you could basically reduce everything down to the family and [...] see what was wrong with society"(Boxer DVD commentary). Liam understands that the reason he barely knows his father is because of the "Troubles." When the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) donates new boxing gear to the gym, Liam refuses to accept the gift, citing the police force's complicity in his father's incarceration. He has been waiting for the return of his father his whole life; due to the intensely ideological setting of his childhood, in his mind his father and Republicanism are inextricably linked. He understands his father, indeed his entire family, through the discourse of IRA rhetoric. His mother's apparent betrayal hurts him on more than one level, driving him to exact symbolic revenge. He burns down the boxing gym, simultaneously attacking Danny and the non-sectarian values that the club stood for.

John Turner suggests that "when films use different surveillance techniques as part of the narrative substance of the film's diagesis, this usually serves as a prelude to

violence" (4). Liam's fiery revenge represents the violent apex of his watchful society's paranoia. He and his community are constantly exposed and exposing, both suffering under and sustaining the poisonous atmosphere of *The Boxer*'s West Belfast. Every resident is subject to the often violent eye of the British: helicopters, checkpoints, and guards are a constant threat. Similarly, the IRA is hyper-vigilant, using camera and neighbours to enact a sense of wary submission. Maggie is most restricted by the gaze of another potentially violent warden: Liam's jealous eye holds intense power over her. It is motherhood that renders the imprisoned IRA wives the most highly restricted group in West Belfast. Before Liam lashes out, it seems inevitable that Danny and Maggie will pursue their relationship, opposing their neighbours in favour of self-determination; yet when Maggie learns that Liam is responsible for the fire, she exhibits a maternal loyalty that trumps her own desires and needs. It is unclear whether her decision to leave Danny is motivated by love, or fear. When she tells Danny she wants him to leave, he asks whether she has been threatened, assuming that Harry or her father is at the root of her hesitation. She responds, "I do have a mind of my own Danny," but in reality, the IRA is at the root of her decision; Liam has been influenced by a life of surveillance and paranoia, and his violent act represents his first flirtation with his grandfather's and father's methods. Maggie finds herself in an impossible situation: to defy Harry and even her father by carrying on a secret liaison with Danny is a dangerous but still possible situation, she is unwilling to betray Liam.

As Danny becomes increasingly agitated by her silence, threatening violence against whoever is responsible for her change of heart, the hopelessness of her situation becomes more and more apparent. Danny's threats are impotent and painful: physical violence is not an option because, as she finally blurts out, "Liam burned down the gym." She explains, "when he was born, Danny, I held him in my arms and it made everything alright. I can't hurt him." Maggie's decision to choose Liam over Danny, even though her relationship with Danny is framed as her only chance at happiness, is almost inevitable. As soon as he learns that Maggie's rejection of him is the result of Liam's needs, Danny gives up on West Belfast and Maggie, choosing to sell himself to a rich English audience, boxing against other colonial subjects in televised boxing matches; even he seems to accept that nothing can come between a woman and her child. Even though Maggie eventually faces her wardens (the IRA, her father, and the British soldier who questions her at a checkpoint), there is still one watcher who continues to maintain total control over her life: Liam's gaze exerts immense pressure over her actions. As Bill Rolston notes, many "Troubles" narratives "would have us believe that women are peace-loving by nature – or, more accurately, by biology" (44). As a mother, Maggie is portrayed as being willing to do anything to maintain Liam's safety. As soon as her relationship with Danny shows negative, violent effects on her son, she abandons it. Just as her father has controlled her for much of her life (as she angrily informs him, "I'm a prisoner here. You and your politics have made sure of that"), her son has the potential to make her decisions for her.

As Moser explains, "Liam is a character whose masculinity hangs in the balance throughout the film" (93). As a boy who has grown up without a father, his sense of what constitutes successful manhood is incomplete. In one sense, his experiment in violent masculinity, the gym fire, is a success: it drives away Danny, his perceived competitor, keeping his mother right where she is. Yet, Liam is not pleased with the results of his action. After Danny leaves and trainer Ike slips back into alcoholism, Liam finally understands the impact that his decision to burn the gym has had on others. He seems genuinely sorry and actually seeks out Ike who is hanging around the docks drinking. He confesses the motivation for his crime, explaining, "I thought Danny was going to run away with my mother." Ultimately Liam is a boy who is frightened of losing his mother; when he realizes that is not going to happen, he is able to re-evaluate the way that he feels about Danny, and the violence of the IRA. He has experimented with one mode of masculinity, now he is ready to try another. When, during a fight with a Nigerian boxer, Danny decides to leave the fight rather than cause serious damage to the man, the camera cuts to show Liam's alert and child-like face watching it all on television. The previously aggressive act of watching is re-framed as a positive act.

Liam's experiment with violence at the gym is sneaky and boyish, carried out with his immature friends (one actually manages to set himself on fire) in the confusion after a car bombing. However, when Ike is murdered by Harry, Liam asserts his new values openly for all his community to see. The scene is shot from a helicopter. It is the break of day and Ike's body lies in the middle of an open, industrial-looking space. While the

community has gathered to see what is going on, no one dares to approach the lifeless figure. A British soldier warns that it might be booby trapped, but it also seems likely that the onlookers realize they are being watched: any tenderness or respect for Ike could be interpreted as an insult to Harry. Liam, with tears streaming down his face, ignores the unwritten rules and stares of his community. He runs to the body, flanked by a team of soldiers with their guns raised. As he cradles Ike's battered body, the camera moves to Harry and his wife, watching from their balcony. While the gunshot wound on Ike's forehead and the unceremonious disposal of his body suggest a murder meant to dehumanize him, Liam's bold act renders Ike's death meaningful. As the camera recedes up and away as the helicopter moves on, a group of neighbourhood children stand away from Liam: while some turn away, others embrace and watch the horrible scene, their young eyes taking it all in.

The next scene shows Danny's return to Belfast. He is obviously incensed by Ike's murder, and goes right to the door of the house where Joe, Maggie, and Liam are staying. His resolution is clear. When Maggie answers the door, nervously warning him "they're watching the house," he replies "fuck 'em." He boldly confronts Joe, informing him, "I'm going to build a gym for the kids." Joe raises his eyebrows and asks, "are you back for revenge, Danny?" His reply is bold: "no, I'm back for Maggie." Yet Maggie herself says little during the intense scene between Danny and her father. When Danny tells her "it's up to you, you've more things at stake than I have," it seems clear from her expression that Liam is on her mind. While Danny and Maggie pretend that the decision

to be together is theirs to make, past experience suggests otherwise; without Liam's blessing and acceptance of Danny as a father, Maggie is unlikely to be open to continuing their relationship.

The scene cuts immediately to Ike's funeral. It is an instructive scene; within the moral universe of *The Boxer* a character's decision to attend or not implies much about them. Joe is there, so are Maggie and Liam. Interestingly, the juxtaposition of the other attendees creates an interesting comment on Ike's life. Ike's death is marked by a group of old white-haired men, likely the drunks and homeless people of his past, and a small boy, obviously one of the boxers he trained. Altogether, it is a small crowd, and there is no indication that he has any close relatives in attendance. It is Danny who stands front and centre, throwing dirt on the coffin as it is lowered into the ground; in this scene Danny is framed as Ike's son, the man who will rebuild Ike's gym and continue offering Belfast boys a regulated alternative to street violence. Yet, another, more important father-son identification takes place at the funeral. As Danny stands opposite the gathered crowd, Liam sees him standing alone and crosses over to him, a symbolic moment indicating that he has made his choice. He will be a Danny, not a Harry. Liam's open acceptance of Danny means Maggie is finally permitted to pursue her relationship with Danny, while still fulfilling her motherly "responsibility". From that moment on, Maggie, Danny, and Liam are framed as a family.

Yet, their decision to leave the funeral in the same car proves dangerous. Liam realizes they are being followed, and, almost immediately, they are blocked on all sides

by vehicles full of angry IRA men. Maggie and Danny have finally made their relationship public, and Harry is ready to act. His first angry statement to Danny nullifies Maggie's status as an individual: "I'm not going to let you drive around with a prisoner's wife, Danny-boy." If the scene at the wedding party was a warning, meant to establish the IRA's proprietary control over prisoners' wives, this is the real thing. Maggie's long past with Danny and the depth of their relationship is denied as Harry demands, "did you forget your wedding ring you fuckin' hoor?" Yet, unlike the prisoner's wife at the wedding, Maggie is not willing to accept her punishment quietly; after Danny is stuffed into a van and driven off, she breaks away from an angry crowd of women and takes the driver's seat in Danny's car. She will not submit to her community's rules any longer. As British helicopters hum uselessly overhead, Maggie takes her situation into her own hands. She finds a severely beaten yet safe Danny hunched beside Harry's lifeless body. Instead of executing Danny, the IRA eradicates Harry, an internal threat to the tenuous cease-fire. Maggie and Liam both rush to him, the three of them holding each other in a meaningful embrace. They have been through a hellish experience that has strengthened their bond; in their situation, love overcomes fear. As they set off for home, Maggie driving, they are stopped at a British military checkpoint. When she is asked where she is going, she looks the soldier directly in the eyes, "we're going home."

Yet the film's conclusion has received harsh criticism. Barton complains that *The Boxer* is "a work that is beset by contradictory impulses to the point of failing to achieve any convincing sense of closure" (122). She notes that the conclusion ignores various

realities, including Maggie's husband and the hypocrisy of assassinating Harry in the name of peace. I, too, find the ending too easy. In particular, while the film seems to emphasize the importance of personal freedom, Sheridan never questions Liam's power over Maggie. Maggie's relationship with her son is highly essentialist: even as she attains a self-determination outside her father and community, she is never able to move beyond a highly restrictive performance of maternity. While one of the film's greatest climaxes, the gym fire and Danny's subsequent flight from Ireland, could have been prevented had Maggie put her foot down, she remains an extremely passive mother. The family is only united through Liam's decision, and Maggie and Danny must wait for his approval. His dominance implies a sense of propriety over his mother that could be compared to the IRA's treatment of the prisoners' wives. Because Liam is an unfinished character, his identification with Danny is portrayed as a positive development. It could be argued that prior to Danny's return from England, Maggie and Liam are a broken family, hence their dysfunctionality. If, as Barton suggests, Danny is "the bearer of the symbolic love affair that will cement the community and reinvent the family" (110), his integration into the family may result in a more balanced situation. Even if, as Barton and Moser suggest, *The Boxer* is a film that focuses on paternity and masculinity, it is possible that Liam and Danny's successful father/son relationship could also have a favourable effect on the power structure between Liam and his mother.

Ultimately, I believe that within the specific context of my argument about the imprisoned IRA wife, *The Boxer*'s conclusion is positive; Maggie is more likely to

demonstrate her own subjectivity by the end of the film. She has not escaped her warden's gaze; in fact, the point is made repeatedly, that leaving one's home is not an option. In a situation like Maggie's, the greatest triumph is to question hegemonic power. Maggie does this by facing – physically looking at and psychologically addressing – those forces of power. Instead of accepting the regulations of her community, even with an awareness of their misguidedness, Maggie, the imprisoned IRA wife, defends what she believes in: love and family. *The Boxer* arguably ends on a positive note and Maggie's character certainly gains a degree of self-determination. In the next chapter, the character of Róisín moves in the opposite direction, from agency into entrapment.

Chapter 2

Internal Struggles: Nationalism, Feminism,
and the Imprisoned IRA Wife in *The Wrong Man*

In *The Wrong Man* Danny Morrison's representation of Róisín Reynolds's experiences as an IRA wife reflects a deep-rooted conflict within the Republican movement: its uneasy relationship with feminism.[1] From the start, Morrison employs a highly conventional binary model. The narrative equates femininity with the private/personal domain, and masculinity with the public/political sphere. Róisín exhibits little interest in the public sphere of politics; she is more interested in achieving personal emancipation (epitomized throughout the narrative as the attainment of a university degree) and the health and happiness of her young son Aiden than with the objectives of the nationalist community. Yet, *The Wrong Man* makes it clear that her desire to maintain a domestic space outside of the political context of Northern Ireland is naïve. Although Morrison's narrative suggests that, as long as British laws, officials, and bigotry continue to marginalize the nationalist community, "the personal is the political," he

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[1]In 1995, Danny Morrison adapted *The Wrong Man* for the stage, performed at The Pleasance Theatre in London. The production elicited strong cultural commentary, but since the play's plot is quite different from the original novel, I have chosen not to examine it in this project.

never fully considers the feminist implications of that statement.[2] Even though Grainne McCoy argues that Northern Irish women "take action in spaces which are quite different from the terrain of traditional, mainstream politics" (19), Róisín's non-involvement in the "Troubles" is presented as apathy rather than a valid political response. As the story progresses it becomes increasingly clear that within Morrison's IRA community, Republicanism and feminism are competing ideologies. Further, that conflict is most acutely rendered in terms of Roisin's sexual and reproductive freedom; as her "private" life crumbles under the burden of her husband's dedication to the IRA, her sexuality and fertility become sites of ultimate contestation. The violence between unionist and Republican forces has long been figured in terms of a struggle for the feminine body of Ireland, and in the strictly Republican setting of *The Wrong Man* Morrison pits a highly individualistic feminism against Republicanism in the fight for the prize.

Critical response to *The Wrong Man* has been surprisingly limited; even though it was published in 1997, only a handful of published critical analyses exist. Morrison has blamed this somewhat chilly reception on his public profile. He explains, "I think there's a sense, particularly in the North, that 'we shouldn't touch Morrison'" – that because of where I'm coming from, what I'm writing must be propaganda" (Allen 1). While it is

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[2]Interestingly, Danine Farquharson suggests that *The Wrong Man* moves beyond the convention of the "troubles thriller" because of its emphasis on both the public and the personal effects of IRA involvement (91); however, the relationship between Republicanism and gender issues is not addressed in her article.

probably true that some critics dismiss Morrison's text because of his past involvement as a spokesperson for the IRA, his reasoning as to *why* might be too simplistic. The truth is that in a contemporary academic environment sensitive to biographical criticism writing about Morrison's text can be problematic. His former IRA involvement might not be such an issue if he was writing about a totally unrelated subject; however, since he writes about the inner workings of the IRA, it is extremely tempting to read the real life Danny Morrison into his text. The question arises: is there any difference between Danny Morrison the novelist and Danny Morrison the IRA spokesperson? And, does it matter?

The Wrong Man's three primary critics take different approaches to Morrison's public profile. In "Resisting Genre and Type: Narrative Strategy and Instability in Morrison's *The Wrong Man* and Deane's *Reading in the Dark,*" published in 1999, Danine Farquharson pointedly avoids Morrison's public persona, instead taking a genre-theory approach to the text: she reads Morrison's novel within the established conventions of the "thriller." She explains her objective clearly: "I am concerned with the workings of formal narrative strategies and the complex relationship of genre to ideology" (89). She argues that while *The Wrong Man* "works within the genre of political thriller" (90), Morrison's selective use and abuse of thriller convention works to significantly alter its meaning. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews's section about *The Wrong Man* in his 2003 text, *(de)constructing the North: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles Since 1969*, relies heavily on Farquharson's genre approach; however, his analysis does involve aspects of Morrison's biography. Even though Morrison has stated that "art has

to rise above the polemic" (1 Allen), Kennedy-Andrews implicates Morrison's novels in their author's political agenda, suggesting that "Morrison is [...] concerned to become a voice for the criminalised Irish soul, a publicist for the oppressed minority, a political consciousness-raiser on behalf of the Republican movement" (198); further, "in the IRA man, Raymond Massey, Morrison creates a hero" (212). Kennedy-Andrews focuses on Morrison's production of hegemonic pairs, suggesting that "Morrison undeviatingly reproduces the British state as 'evil' and examines the IRA's claim to represent the 'good'" (211). Kennedy-Andrews suggests that even though Raymond Massey cannot be recognized as a purely "heroic" character, the "conspiracy" that he resists, "the hegemonic authority of the British colonial system" (213), is portrayed "as more dangerous to the survival of liberal democracy – the entire western way of life – than the IRA" (213).

Unlike Farquharson, who chooses not to discuss Morrison's real life, and Kennedy-Andrews, whose interest in biography is limited, Patrick Magee's critical approach to *The Wrong Man* is squarely focused on the life and experience of its author. Magee, a former Long Kesh internee himself, suggests that anti-Republicanism and ignorance about the Republican cause are to blame for the novel's lukewarm reception. He argues that Morrison's experiences as a volunteer qualify him to write realistically about the IRA as opposed to compromising him, as some newspaper critics charged. Magee does not believe that good literature must attempt what he calls "contrived balance" (203). He is surprised by some reviewers' complaints that the novel "lacks a

credible counter to Republican characters" (203), arguing that the RUC and loyalist characters are "deliberately under-defined" (203) because that is how they appeared to many Republicans during the period when the novel takes place. He explains that "Republicans rarely get closer to the RUC than in the involuntary exception of a Castlereagh or Gough Barracks 'interview'" (204). He argues that while Morrison does not illuminate the motivations of the men of the RUC or the British army, "for a readership seeking to gain an understanding of the lived experience of a Republican activist in Belfast [...] the novel is recommended" (204). Whether avoided or fully addressed, Magee believes that the influence of Morrison's real-life persona is always present in criticism of *The Wrong Man*.

These three critics also take different approaches to the female characters of *The Wrong Man*. Magee gives little attention to the women in the text (although, to be fair, his overall analysis is not character or plot driven), suggesting that "Róisín Massey, wife of ASU-leader Raymond, is especially well-drawn", and that, even though the character of Tina is "sketchily rendered," she "remains a powerful presence" (203). Farquharson's approach to Morrison's women is more extensive: she directly addresses gender, both male and female, elucidating the highly masculinized stereotype of the IRA gunman, as well as addressing some of the conventional literary approaches to Irish femininity. Even though her discussion about the intersection between Raymond's and Róisín's lives is worded in terms of the political and the private, both these terms carry intensely gendered significance. Her contention that several of Morrison's characters, specifically Róisín

and Tod, adopt roles in an attempt to validate their gendered status is particularly interesting. Farquharson writes that Tod's desire to join the IRA is a result of his lifelong sense of masculine failure rather than any real political conviction, and that "it is his own self-hatred, his own feelings of inadequacy that cause him to lash out at his own icons of manhood" (100).

Farquharson's discussion seems rooted in an awareness of the significance of gender in the lives of Morrison's characters, but Kennedy-Andrews is less constantly conscious of the broad gender issues at play in *The Wrong Man*; however, he does notice their effects, namely Róisín's challenge to "Raymond's heroic status" (213). Kennedy-Andrews proposes that Róisín, a sometimes powerful, always opinionated female figure, is a potential threat to Raymond and the Republican cause. She is not blindly devoted like Tod's wife Sal, nor does her love for Raymond encourage her to pursue political involvement of her own, like IRA volunteer Tina. While Kennedy-Andrews suggests that Róisín poses "a threat to male independence and patriarchal power" (214), all of the modes of power that he sees for her are reduced to her biological abilities, such as her decision to manipulate her fertility with "the pill" and her body's attractiveness to men, Tod specifically. Disappointingly, while Kennedy-Andrews's discussion of women in *The Wrong Man* notes Róisín's regression from hopeful confidence to deflated powerlessness, his analysis offers no explanation of how or why it happens. Kennedy-Andrews's concluding sentence elucidates, perhaps a little too kindly, a major flaw in *The Wrong Man*: "Morrison is prepared to fulfil the feminist demand for strong, angry,

independent women without in the end overturning patriarchy or the political imperative" (215). Róisín is certainly framed in terms of stereotypes about feminism, that is "strong, angry, independent" (215), but she is only "empowered" so that her fall from power may be accentuated. She is a straw feminist, ritually sacrificed to Morrison's political agenda. That political agenda is considerably more interested in male, Republican heroism than in female empowerment. Morrison's conventional binary model (female = private, male = political) demands further analysis.

Morrison introduces Róisín and Raymond through a series of stark juxtapositions: they are immediately established as opposite types. Róisín's existence is initially characterized by freedom. Morrison presents her while she and her mid-morning breakfast retire back to bed. He meticulously details her little feast, "a pot of tea, milk in a miniature ceramic ewer, a pot of strawberry jam, two rounds of toast and a bowl of muesli into which she had sliced up a banana," including the self-congratulatory "*tres bien*, madame" (19) with which she concludes the meal. If the charming details of her morning snack seem inconsequential, that is the point: they are included to emphasize the luxury of Róisín's life. Even though there is housework to be done, she decides to put it off in favour of a more sensual activity: a luxurious bath, described through a soft lens of bubbles. When she finally emerges from her boudoir, she completes a perfectly relaxing day by picking up a second-hand French grammar book, a nice cosmopolitan touch to her day of pampering.

Raymond's day, described concurrently with Róisín's, is significantly different.

While Róisín enjoys the billowy embrace of her duvet, Raymond stands before the critical gaze of a prison guard: hairy, dirty, and naked but for a rough blanket. The private luxury of Róisín's bubble bath contrasts with the pointed political currency of Raymond's first shower since beginning a dirty protest. Her problems include the household chores, doing the shopping, and deciding what gift to buy for her son's birthday; his problems include the injustice of centuries of British subjugation and brutality. Raymond, literally incarcerated but also ideologically bound to Republicanism, stands in profound contrast to Róisín's domesticized liberation. Morrison's narrative voice sits in judgement of Róisín – she enjoys "the surplus of sleep so easily available to the untroubled" (20). She is parallelled with the other uninvolved, unsupportive residents of Belfast: "just wanting the ordinary things in life, a bit of peace, a bit of work, not challenging the injustices, anything for a quiet life" (79). When an IRA volunteer asks Róisín and her fellow taxi riders for donations, she, like the other passengers, "threw her spare coins into the plastic bucket" (23) without giving a second thought to the conflict gripping her city. Her token support of the Republican movement is the result of habit more than conviction; her primary concerns are private, centring on her son Aidan, and personal ambitions.

I do not believe I have ever heard the life of a single mother described as a leisurely experience: Morrison's romantic account of Róisín's day reveals his denigration of not just the difficulty of what might be described as "women's work," but also the social/political validity of that work. Further, his decision to juxtapose Róisín's and Raymond's days is extremely judgemental: domestic life, the primary employment of

most of his women, forms one side of a binary pair privileging the public, political existence of his men. Róisín, as a woman, is fundamentally equated with domesticity, thereby nullifying the agency of her actions in the home. As Raia Prohovnik explains, part of the feminist agenda is "to widen the scope of the seventeenth century rejection of patriarchal power and include the family, marriage and sexuality within the scope of issues in which power – gendered power – is acknowledged as being exercised" (86). While Prokhovnik argues that "practises in the private sphere are also political in character, in the sense of not being simply "natural" (86), Róisín's personal politics are not taken seriously in *The Wrong Man*.

Róisín's overtly "feminist" actions are minimized, portrayed as obligatory motions rather than serious modes of resistance. When the narrator addresses Róisín's feminism, it is made light of, turned into a humorous nod to political correctness not a valid political concern, as in one scene where Róisín asks Raymond what he is thinking about. "The girls in Armagh jail" (36), he nobly responds. Róisín teasingly reprimands him: "'women', she corrected him. 'Women, not girls!'" (36). Similarly, when Aiden asks his mother about dinner, Róisín makes light of societal expectations of motherhood, joking, "Dinner? But sure we had dinner yesterday!" (65). Róisín's feminist rejoinders are reduced to hollow gesture. After her wedding "she's still Róisín Reynolds" (73); however, despite this semantic gesture of nominal independence, the narrator maintains that her primary role is as "Raymond Massey's wife" (91). There is a palpable tension present in the narrator's characterization of Róisín. While her words and actions are

assertive, they are also consistently subverted. The result of this narrative deflation is profound. *The Wrong Man* is not engaging in a theoretical debate about how much or how little feminism speaks to postmodern narrative; rather, the narrative's impulse is to control and restrict the agency of feminist ideology. The contradictory acts of creating and then containing feminist discourse strain against each other, resulting in a narrative eyesore that damages Róisín's character.

Within the Republican movement, the issue of whether feminism and Republicanism can be mutually supportive is a long-standing issue of contention. As Claire Hackett, a member of the feminist, Republican organization Clár na mBan explains, "feminists challenging the Republican movement from within are often seen to be disloyal, to be breaking ranks which need to be solid in order to be strong" (113). More dangerously, "a feminist critique of nationalism risks being interpreted as support for British troops on the streets of Belfast" (Cullingford, *Ireland's Others* 5). The appearance of a united front is essential in arguing that a united Ireland is a viable, equitable option. Yet, Republican women argue that "Sinn Fein is still a male-dominated party and as such cannot always be trusted to make women's interests a priority" (Hackett 113), and that while "the attempt to reach an area where we can all agree and unite is understandable as an effort to find a strong voice in an oppressive society," it can be destructive if "it leads to the suppression of difference" (112). While both Republicans and feminists emphasize their dedication to "self-determination," "the right and ability to make real choices about our lives," Hackett specifies that in relation to women, those

choices are not only concerned with the political structures of power but with "our fertility, our sexuality, childcare, the means to be independent and all the areas in which we are currently denied autonomy and dignity in our various identities as women" (111).

The issue of female identity is one of the greatest obstacles in bridging the gap between feminism and Republicanism. As Simone de Beauvoir notes decades ago in relation to female identity politics, "the contrary facts of [a women's] experience are impotent against myth" (1406). The primacy of real women's identities within Republicanism has been compromised by the movement's tactical engagement of metaphorical females. Róisín Dubh, or Dark Rosaleen figures "in dozens of variations as a suffering woman, typically the passive victim of some unworthy captor" (McMullen 37). During her incarceration "Rosaleen's steadfast devotion to 'home' sustains her until she is delivered by her true – because loyally Irish – lover/defender" (37). In *The Boxer*, Joe uses the Rosaleen myth to valorize the position of the IRA prisoners' wife. During his wedding speech Joe implores the women to keep the home fires burning, he is essentially asking the gathered women to be loyal Rosaleens. The way that the myth of Dark Rosaleen is sold to men is different: that version of the story relies on the ultra-conventional trope of comparing Ireland, the contested nation, with the contested body of

a female. This is a highly patriarchal metaphor that presupposes a masculine imperative to protect the passive female body, playing on propriety, both legal and sexual.[3]

The imposition of the character of Róisín Dubh over Morrison's character is far from seamless: Róisín Reynolds is unable, or unwilling, to live up to her iconic namesake. Morrison's introduction establishes that Róisín is undoubtedly dedicated to "home," but her definition of that word is devoid of Republican tones. In fact, the disintegration of their married life, due to Raymond's obsessive IRA involvement, or her lack of national loyalty, depending on one's ideological slant, is physically enacted through the physical disintegration of their home. Before her marriage to Raymond, Róisín keeps a clean home that she is hesitant to give up. "She liked the house she was in. She had good memories of Aidan's infancy"; however, when Raymond asks if they could move, to allow for "a brand new start," she agrees, sympathetic that he could probably "feel Mickey lurking in the woodwork" (67). Immediately after their wedding, before they even finish redecorating their symbolic family home, Raymond goes "back to active service" (80), and is arrested for his involvement in an attack on an army barracks. At this point Róisín still maintains that the authorities have imprisoned "the wrong man," that he would not knowingly jeopardize their domestic happiness for the IRA. She is still an active homemaker, and her first conversation with him as a prisoner's wife centres

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[3]Though at the genesis of the Róisín Dubh trope, there would have been little distinction between the two.

around their home-improvement activities. While he sits in a state of wonder over her naïveté, she details the damage to the house caused by a police raid subsequent to his arrest. Both she and Aidan still believe in his innocence, and that in his absence they must literally and metaphorically tend the house; she proudly tells him that little Aidan intends to repaper his destroyed bedroom "just the way you did" (84).

As it becomes increasingly apparent that Raymond's dedication to the cause is deeper than his dedication to Róisín, that tension manifests itself in the home, the bastion of both feminine and Republican activity. While Raymond and his fellow prisoners bond in prison, he learns that since his incarceration Róisín has been "sitting around the house, constantly worrying" (87); in his absence, she too endures a sort of imprisonment. When Raymond implores her to go out, she replies that she has not got time "between Aidan, looking after the house and doing my assignments" (87). Even with her marriage she is still dedicated to the same goals as before her marriage. She continues to maintain her personal priorities, even under immense politicized stress; however, as Raymond suspects, the truth is that she is finding the burden nearly impossible to bear. As she realizes while at a pub, her first time outside the house in ages, "a lot of life had been passing her by whilst she had been at home rearing Aiden, cooking and ironing, cleaning a house, rushing out to college for a few hours, visiting jail three times a week" (89). The personal priorities she privileged before her marriage are becoming more difficult to maintain contemporaneously with her new responsibilities as an IRA prisoner's wife.

Even harder for her to accept is the culture of hero-worship that surrounds her husband and his comrades. Her often frustrating personal experiences as his wife conflict sharply with his public persona. Róisín finds her community's extravagant praise of Raymond, and the accompanying social pressure on her own actions, difficult to handle. Fellow volunteer and eventual informer Tod looks on Raymond as a sort of superman – he tells his beleaguered wife Sal that "Raymond Massey was probably the bravest man in Ireland" (68) – and the other IRA wives and girlfriends consider him an excellent catch. Raymond, as a quasi-mythic character within local lore, is understood as public property, and he readily accepts that status. Once again, the state of the home is indicative of the state of its inhabitants. What official body allocates the house to Raymond and Róisín is unclear: it could be either the IRA, or the Belfast housing authority. Whatever the case, it is essential to recall that Raymond and Róisín's home is not private property, as evidenced by both repeated police raids, and the endless stream of neighbours beseeching IRA assistance from Raymond. As a constant torrent of people knock on their door asking for help, money, and advice, Róisín begins to resent their intrusion into her personal life: "often she felt like throwing many of these constituents out the door for wasting her and her husband's precious time" (113). In *The Boxer* Maggie's home is also invaded by IRA business; however, while in *The Boxer* the intrusion of the public into the private only serves to emphasize that Maggie is the object of Foucaldian surveillance, in *The Wrong Man* Róisín's objections are presented as selfish and unjustified. Raymond is firm: "these are our supporters" (113). When she seeks support from the other IRA wives

and girlfriends, and some consolation that others experience the same troubles as she does, she is disappointed. As in *The Boxer*, there seems to be little supportive friendship between IRA wives: they go out drinking together, but seem hesitant to talk about personal matters. When Róisín expresses her hesitations about the responsibilities of being a prisoner's wife, Tina, a prisoner's girlfriend (and the only female IRA member in the text)[4] is incredulous: "Raymond Massey's wife. Raymond's a great guy, Róisín. He's the best. Without people like him we'd be lost, I'm telling you" (91). As Róisín discovers, Róisín Dubh's dedication to home connotes much more than good housekeeping. As Cullingford explains, within the conventional context of Republican nationalism "the role of woman is to stay at home, reproduce and suffer" ("Thinking" 13).

While Róisín both stays at home and suffers, her refusal to reproduce is, at best, framed as immature, and, at worst, framed as unnatural. Within conventional Republican symbolism femininity, motherhood, and suffering are inextricably bound, and so to refuse one aspect is to question the other two and the entire symbolic system. After being dragged to see a medium, Mrs. Haskins, Róisín responds firmly to the old woman's assessment that she is a "very pretty girl" (53). "Woman," Róisín corrects, "I was a girl"

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[4]Tina is an interesting case. As a literary representation of a female IRA member, she is quite anomalous in that she is presented as a rational, dedicated character, rather than a crazed unnatural woman. Yet, she is not the productive link between feminism and Republicanism that she could be. She appears to be involved in the IRA not because of the sort of independent political motivation espoused by Raymond, but because of her long-term romantic involvement with a prisoner. In a certain sense, she is actually the ultimate loyal prisoner's wife.

(53). Mrs. Haskins's opinion is obviously unswayed by Roisin's correction, but she does offer some advice. She tells Róisín that if she wants a new wedding ring (from Raymond, of course) she must remove the old one from her marriage to Mickey; however, she warns Róisín to "think long and hard, dear, long and hard, because you'll stop being a girl" (54). She elaborates that Róisín is "a mother of two," but that "there is a father in danger, or a dangerous father in their lives" (54). Even the most inattentive reader will argue that Róisín, repeatedly referred to as a girl, is already a biological mother; however, Aiden's father is one incarnation of the titular "wrong man." Mickey exhibits no interest in the IRA. He is one of the only characters in the text, other than guards, soldiers, and police-officers, who shows absolutely no sympathy towards the Republican cause. Not only does he refuse to show respect for Raymond, he confronts Róisín about the threat that having him around the house could hold for Aiden, telling her, "if he's here placing my son's life in danger I'll be on to child welfare, so put that in your pipe" (34). He also mocks Raymond's low financial status, the result of an adult life spent in jail or as a volunteer, responding to Róisín's demand that he stop spoiling Aiden by snorting, "Lover boy'll hardly buy him or you anything" (34). Raymond's political status could not impress him less.

Mickey is an anomalous man in this narrative; his concerns about his private life entirely outweigh any sort of political conscience. One could even argue that he is a female-man in the Republican logic of *The Wrong Man*. Mickey's sense of ethics does not fare well within the moral universe of *The Wrong Man*: Róisín's first marriage was

clearly a mistake, not only because of Mickey's constant infidelity (another character flaw), but also because of his selfishness, exemplified by his unwillingness to sacrifice anything of himself to the cause of a united Ireland. Róisín gains none of the status available to the national mother. She remains a girl, having frittered away her reproductive potential with an apathetic abstentionist rather than fulfilling the motherly potential available to, and expected of her.

Yet after her marriage to Raymond, a symbolically ideal father, she continues to maintain complete control over her reproductive potential through the use of birth control. While Róisín's free sexuality is initially framed in positive terms (during happier times, Raymond describes her as "an amazing teacher" (44)), as the tension between feminism and Republicanism rises, her sexual voracity becomes a major indictment of her character. Indeed, the pursuit of sexual pleasure is presented in opposition to the pursuit of a free republic. Raymond is uninterested in sex; the night he is released from prison, he seeks the political companionship of his fellow volunteers rather than physical satisfaction with a woman.[5] By contrast, Mickey, the most anti-IRA character in *The Wrong Man*, has a wandering eye. His infidelity is responsible for the breakdown of his marriage with Róisín. Yet, despite Mickey's proven lack of loyalty, after her marriage

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[5]In fact, Raymond's relationship with his, primarily male, comrades is often described in homoerotic terms, such as when he realizes that the closest he has ever come to true romantic love was in prison with his fellow blanket men (45). A discussion of male sexuality and Republican loyalty could yield interesting results; however, this is not the focus of my inquiry.

Róisín still cannot help but favourably compare his sexual prowess against Raymond's. Her priorities are still suspiciously selfish; it seems likely she would rather enjoy herself in bed than participate in the expulsion of the British.

What was initially framed as immaturity or naïveté slowly emerges as something more sinister: Róisín indulges in the selfish pleasure of sex without producing children for Raymond, or "Ireland," as she vindictively refers to him during a fight. Her refusal to reproduce is then linked with Morrison's symbol of feminist independence, her pursuit of a university degree. Whenever Róisín and Raymond discuss having a child, Róisín's academic goals serve as a stumbling block. The narrator reveals Róisín's true hesitation: "sometimes she felt broody, felt like having another child.[...] At other times, this reverie could strike her as absolutely crazy, more entrapment" (67). Róisín recognizes maternity as a state that could restrain her own objectives, and she rebels against it. As de Beauvoir explains, "as group symbols and social types are generally defined by means of antonyms in pairs, ambivalence will seem to be an intrinsic quality of the eternal feminine" (1406). While one side of the Mother Éire symbol is the veneration of a rigidly defined national mother, the other side is the revulsion of a sluttish and infertile "wrong mother." There is no space for shades of perception in *The Wrong Man.* If the expectations of Mother Éire are "contradicted by the behaviour of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine" (de Beauvoir 1406).

Bill Rolston has noted that in Northern Irish literature "once women have taken the plunge into the unnatural and rejected their prime role as mother, anything is possible" (50). Róisín and Raymond's final confrontation clearly illustrates what was hitherto only hinted at in the novel: Róisín is a failed woman. By the end of *The Wrong Man*, Róisín has truly degenerated. She is a violent, alcoholic, mentally unstable version of her former self. She has failed in her maternal duty to Aidan. By the conclusion of *The Wrong Man*, he is wetting the bed and has "learnt to take himself off early and bottle up his own sadness at his mother's strange ways" (147). Rather than nurturing her son, Róisín has destroyed him. While in *The Boxer* Liam's anger towards his mother is proven misguided (he realizes his community is more to blame for his problems than she is), Aiden is unable to empathize with his mother, eventually even blaming her for his father's decision to leave the family. All of Róisín's "positive" feminist characteristics turn destructive. Within the logic of *The Wrong Man*, her independence is selfish and her assertiveness becomes violent. Worst of all, she achieves nothing through her feminist rebellion. Her failure as a feminist is reflected in her failure to pass her courses, and made more pathetic when she lies about her results.

By the end of *The Wrong Man* it is clear that Róisín and Raymond's marriage is damaged beyond repair. When Róisín picks up a knife and proceeds to chase Raymond, she is out of control; when she snarls, "I'm a nutcase and you're a murderer. Isn't it well we never had a baby" (160), it is hard not to agree. Yet, Róisín is "a mother of two" (54). The punishment for her refusal to accept Republican expectations of femininity, including

producing loyal Irish sons and daughters with Raymond, fits her crime. She becomes pregnant as a result of a drunken sexual encounter with the novel's ultimate "wrong man," Tod. Once again, Morrison's narrator renders sex dirty, an unceasing metaphor for both selfishness and betrayal. The sexual episode is offensive and brutally anti-feminist; Róisín, who has so carefully guarded her fertility, offering good reasons for her refusal to reproduce, such as her own personal ambitions, Raymond's lack of parental support, and her lack of finances, allows herself to be seduced by Tod, an immature, prematurely ejaculating Cassanova with a wife and baby at home. In a flash, all of her feminist explanations are put into question: she is rendered pathetic, responding to Tod's flattery by giving up what, till that point, had been well protected. Tod, as an informer, betrays his friends and the Republican movement, but Róisín's betrayal is more complete. She has betrayed not only Raymond, Republicanism, her nation, and her femininity, but also herself. Her feminist stance proves destructive to her community, but is also personally meaningless. In the end, Róisín is punished as only a woman could be: her attempt to circumvent an ideologically restrictive and biologically based identity leads to the ultimate re-inscription of conventional expectations of femininity. She finds herself back in the position that she had tried so hard to exceed. She is a single mother with no education, no support, and, now, no dignity. Under the repressive morality of *The Wrong Man*, Róisín is a failed mother, a failed wife, and a failed woman.

In *The Wrong Man*, as in *The Boxer*, the IRA wife finds herself in a restricted position; however, unlike Maggie, Róisín is never permitted to question her limited

status. While Maggie's acts of rebellion lead to growth, Róisín's lead to destruction. Even though Morrison describes *The Wrong Man* as "not an apology for the IRA or its armed struggle, but [...] a sympathetic portrayal of human beings, especially the two women characters, who are victims of history and politics and of decisions their menfolk take" ("Enemy" 2), I disagree. Morrison's text indicts the effects of feminism within the Republican movement. Róisín is presented as a definite decision-maker, and is then shown as the architect of her own downfall. In *The Boxer* the metaphorical imprisonment of IRA wives is criticized and their resistance is complex and multi-layered. *The Wrong Man* makes cursory gestures suggesting an awareness of the limitations of Republican expectations of femininity only to re-inscribe conventional images of Republican male heroism and female treachery. After enacting the divide between the two ideologies, Morrison makes no attempt to bridge the discourses of feminism and Republicanism; ultimately, Irish feminism is a threat from within, a contradictory force in a situation where the regulation of the female body is "a figurative element in rebellion against the colonial regime and [...] a literal mechanism for sustaining political legitimacy" (McMullen 38). The symbolic identity of the mythic woman remains more valuable for the Republican movement than the acknowledgement of real women's experiences. When Bill Rolston titled his article on images of women in Northern Irish novels "Mothers, Whores and Villains" he may as well have been describing Róisín Reynolds. In the final chapter of this thesis, an alternative to the destructive, treacherous feminine is analyzed through a reading of Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*.

Chapter 3

No More Mothers, Whores, and Villains:
Female Agency and Identity in *Ourselves Alone*

The Boxer and *The Wrong Man* offer different representations of issues facing women within the Irish Republican movement, but there is another crucial perspective that invites investigation: how does a female author address questions of female identity and incarceration? Anne Devlin's 1985 play *Ourselves Alone* explores many of the same major issues as *The Boxer* and *The Wrong Man* (the private/public dichotomy, incarceration, women, and the IRA); however, while the importance of the experiences of female characters in those two texts are arguably secondary to those of a male protagonist (Danny, Raymond, or Tod), in *Ourselves Alone* women's identity takes centre stage. In *The Boxer* Maggie is the only central female character, and she is the symbolic IRA wife, an individual standing in for a multitude. In *The Wrong Man* Róisín is the primary female voice, with some marginal interjections by Tina and Sal, and yet each of the women's characteristics is reduced to type, showing little growth or depth. In contrast, Devlin's representation of female identity in *Ourselves Alone* is complex, fluid, and unpredictable. While Sheridan's and Morrison's women tend to function as singular didactic devices, one-dimensional characters, Devlin's have complex individual and social identities.

The issue of identity politics can be a critical minefield; one issue in contemporary feminism is whether a claim of artistic authority solely based on gender distinction has

any relevance due to the instability and inflexibility of such rigidly defined modes of identity. Just as it is hazardous to imbue Morrison's text with greater Republican significance because of his close past association with the IRA, Devlin's gender does not immediately render her women more relevant. Devlin's characterization of female identity is not better because she is a woman; rather, it is her attention to diversity and unpredictability that renders her female characters more compelling. In the author's note that precedes the play, Devlin states, "I began this play with two women's voices – one funny and one serious – and then I found I had a third – the voice of a woman listening" (10). Her women are thus framed in terms of dialogue and voice: constantly agreeing, disagreeing, and questioning their situations. Devlin never imposes singular solutions to the problems raised in her play. As Devlin explains, "I do know what they are up against, and I do know what the question is; but I do not know what the answer is" (Cerquoni 111). Her characters make good and bad decisions based upon individual experience, not restrictive convention or narrative imprisonment.

Ourselves Alone takes place in Andersonstown, West Belfast, after the incredibly volatile period after the 1981 deaths of Bobby Sands and nine other Republican hunger strikers. The play's three major characters are Frieda, her sister Josie, and their sister-in-law Donna. Frieda and Josie's father Malachy and brother Liam (Donna's common-law husband) are deeply involved in the IRA; each man has been incarcerated several times. Liam's imprisonment affects Donna deeply. She has already left a husband and young son to be with Liam, yet finds herself alone with her new baby Catherine. After Liam's

return life is no less unbearable; his jealousy and underlying violence threaten her in her own home. Frieda recognizes how Liam's involvement has hurt Donna and her own deceased mother; she has no interest in her family's political legacy. Frieda just wants to be a famous singer; however, her community is uncomfortable with her refusal to take political sides. When her father effectively disowns her, Frieda goes to live with John McDermott, a childhood friend and ardent socialist. Yet, his politics prove equally distasteful. Ultimately, Frieda makes the decision to leave Ireland altogether, choosing exile over male domination. In contrast, her sister Josie adopts the family cause; however, as a woman her role is less active than those of her male relatives. One of Josie's assigned roles is interviewing potential volunteers.[1] It is by her approval that British recruit Joe Conlan is accepted into the IRA. Joe and Josie begin an affair, and Josie becomes pregnant. She is jubilant at first; however, soon it becomes clear that Joe is not who he claims to be. He betrays the IRA and disappears from Josie's life. Three different endings face Devlin's three characters: domestic dissatisfaction, exile, and abandonment.

Of the three primary texts discussed in this thesis, *Ourselves Alone* has generated the most scholarly publication. Critical responses include reviews of specific performances of the play, critical overviews of Anne Devlin's work, and book chapters

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[1]Josie's role as an interviewer maintains and expands the importance of voice in Devlin's performance of female identity.

and articles devoted to *Ourselves Alone.* Intriguingly, the play has been read as both an inspiring feminist work and as a re-inscription of female (dis)agency. And yet, a central concern emerges in the body of criticism of *Ourselves Alone*: self-determination. In "Reproducing the Nation: Nationalism, Reproduction and Paternalism in Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone,*" published in *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities*, Ann Rea proposes that the issue of paternity becomes a metaphor for "the political dispute in Northern Ireland" (204).[2] Rea is most interested in the dispute that emerges between Malachy and Liam when Josie reveals she is pregnant. While women are, undoubtedly, the protagonists of the play, conflicts concerning the rights and responsibilities of fatherhood remain at centre stage. As Rea explains, these disputes symbolize "shifts in the IRA leadership (which Devlin portrays as a competition for paternal authority) both within the movement and in the nation that the men hope to create" (204). Female self-determination jostles for position, interrupting an existing male power struggle.

Rea's most interesting assertion is that "masculine authority overlaps with militarist's activity and the home becomes a metonym for the nation" (206). Indeed, most of Rea's argument focuses on why the public/private dichotomy is so central to Devlin's

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[2]Paternity represents a major shift in the symbolic gendering of the Northern Irish conflict; as I have already noted, Ireland is nearly exclusively figured in terms of maternity and the female body.

depiction of nationalist masculinities and femininities.[3] Rea suggests that

> the men [...] police the women with whom they live, both because the home is the only arena in which the men can exercise their claims to greater authority and because they see this policing as central in preventing the corruption of the family and the new nation. (206)

I would hasten to argue that while they would like to imagine they are authority figures in their homes neither Liam nor Malachy achieves much control over their female relatives, and such impotence is a primary reason for their often tyrannical behaviour. As Rea suggests, a rupture in paternal authority occurs; by questioning Malachy's authority, Liam destabilizes family and nationalist order, rupturing any sense of stability (however flawed and patriarchal it might be). Rea concludes, "in the case of Irish Republicanism, anxieties about gender and sexuality are fundamental to the construction of that form or nationalism itself" (223). In Rea's opinion, Devlin's men's impulse to enact paternity is based upon a desire to provide "evidence of masculine sufficiency" (223).

Yet *Ourselves Alone* is primarily a play about women. In her article "De/re/construction Work: Female Performances of Northern Irish Nationalism in the Works of Anne Devlin and Christina Reid," Laura Kane chooses to focus on Devlin's female characters. First she discusses Frieda, "a woman moved more by what the nationalist rhetoric excludes – the narratives of women and the products of her own

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[3]See the discussions of the home and the public/private dichotomy in Chapters 1 and 2.

creative activity" (35). Kane suggests that Frieda represents "one possible subject position in Northern Ireland – that of the neutral individual" (36). Frieda's position is therefore untenable within her community: "she must select a sponsor capable of providing for her otherwise she will be forced to revert to the default position of being claimed by her father of the Republicans" (35). Kane suggests that for the women in Devlin's play "agency is limited to picking one's poison" (36). Josie's "poison" is different from Frieda's: "rather than hoping to somehow escape the political conflict, Josie seems to be making a play for power and agency within the system of competing nationalisms" (36). Kane implies that Josie's toughness is an act: often she "takes on male roles, postures and ways of speaking in an attempt to sublimate her seemingly impossible and traditionally 'female' desire for a romantic relationship with a man, in favor of the surrogate of homoerotic friendship within the bonds of a nationalist tribe" (37). Indeed, when Josie falls in love with Joe, and becomes pregnant with his child, she considers giving up Republicanism; however, when she learns Joe has betrayed her, she loses her fledgling sense of self-determination. As Kane explains, "Josie remains subject to problems including sexual and emotional dissatisfaction and domestic abuse, and ultimately cannot choose to leave the Republican fold" (37).

At the end of her article Kane suggests that "the ultimate signal of the impossibility of self-definition for these women is the failure to sustain the alternative community they establish when they are alone in Donna's house: while Republicanism has no fulfilling space for them, it still compromises their ability to create space for

themselves." (38) As Kane concludes, "the women are never really 'themselves alone'; they are always interrupted by the arrival of men – fathers, lovers, policemen – who break up the community by forcing the women to somehow serve their needs" (38). For Kane, the play ends on a note of frustration: the struggles of Devlin's female characters underline the uncomfortable situation of women within Republicanism. Despite their best efforts, the women never attain the self-determination they desire.

By contrast, in "What is 'Left to a Woman of the House' When the Irish Situation is Staged?" Esther Beth Sullivan argues that Devlin's women do enact some degree of self-determination: "small daily acts are the mode of resistance" (221) employed by these women. Mary Trotter's primary critical concern is whether or not Devlin's women improve their situations over the course of the play. Trotter notes that "at first it seems that these women are escaping familial and social oppression and finding their voices through liaisons with men" (122). Donna is reunited with ex-prisoner Liam, the man for whom she left a marriage and a small child. Josie falls in love with Joe Conran, thus helping her forget about ex-lover Cathal. And, Frieda moves away from Republicanism through her relationship with socialist John McDermot. All three of these new relationships fail: all of the men are "traitors" to their women (Trotter 123). Most critics have taken a negative view of these failed relationships, but Trotter argues that "all three women survive these 'treasons,' relying on their individual and communal strength as women to see them through these personal and political crises" (123). Trotter suggests that the loss of their men is crucial to their ability to "have a chance to be [themselves]"

(123). There is little consensus as to the impact of the decisions made by Devlin's women; however, as I will argue, the ambiguity in *Ourselves Alone* is one of its strongest points.

In *Ourselves Alone*, Devlin initially divides Republicanism's public and private spaces along gendered lines: act 1, scene 1 opens in a club overwhelmingly patronized by men, and described in the stage directions as "the centre of Republican activity, political and social, in West Belfast" (13). Frieda, the youngest and most outspoken of Devlin's trinity of female protagonists, rehearses a series of rebel songs while an IRA meeting takes place in an upper room. As the stage directions explain, "the period of Republicanism in the post-hunger-strike days is set by the wall hangings; the traditional prominence of Pearse and Connolly has given way to the faces in black and white of ten men" (13). While the names and political means are slightly different from 1916, one thing stays the same: this room, and the organization it houses, is a masculine space. Devlin's pub has several things in common with the one where Joe addresses the prisoners' wives in *The Boxer*: both are decorated with the faces of hunger strikers, and both are imbued with an atmosphere of sexual/violent tension (recalling the physical warning received by the man who dances with a prisoner's wife in *The Boxer*). Frieda's feminine presence renders her not only noticeable (she rehearses sitting in a dark room illuminated by a bright light) but also vulnerable. After leaving the club she tells Donna and Josie, "I was nearly gang-raped at the club [...] I was the only woman in the room" (18). In both *The Boxer* and *Ourselves Alone*, women are allowed into such political

spaces only in so far as they validate them: Frieda is there singing propagandist songs, and the wives are gathered to celebrate another woman's loyalty to her imprisoned husband.

Just as notable as Frieda's blatant presence at the club is her sister Josie's obvious absence from it; even though Josie is a volunteer, she is at home, introduced as she sits alone in a dark room. She is unaware of the meeting at the club and lamenting her failing relationship with married volunteer Cathal O'Donnell, instead of engaging in the political dialogue of men. While darkness pervades both spaces (club and home), Josie's female solitude in contrast to Frieda's marginalization is pointed. Josie's involvement in the IRA is much more complex than that of any of the female characters in *The Boxer* or *The Wrong Man*. While Maggie, like Josie, is the daughter of a high-ranking IRA officer, Maggie is entirely uninvolved in official politics: all of her significant "political" acts are undertaken outside of "the rules." Harry's wife Patsy is the closest thing to an IRA woman in *The Boxer*; however, even though she supports and encourages the organization, she is not a true volunteer. Tina, the female volunteer from Morrison's novel, is the only other female character who is directly involved in Republicanism; in fact, unlike Josie, she actually participates in primary operations, often taking a leadership role. Yet, the motivation for Tina's involvement is simplistic. She never says much about her political opinions; instead, her long-term relationship with Joe, begun at the young age of fourteen, is presented as her primary impetus for involvement. Unlike Josie's questionable dedication to the cause, Tina's is singular and unquestioning. Thus

Tina is allowed entry into the male spaces of *The Wrong Man,* and Josie is separated or excluded from such political domains.

Devlin deliberately presents Josie's IRA involvement as conflicted in order to highlight the tensions inherent in identity politics and political agency. Josie's family connection to the IRA is clearly one significant reason for her involvement. Her father, brother, and two aging aunts support and contribute to the cause. Indeed, the McCoys are known as a political family. As Frieda complains, "my father was interned before I was born. My brother's in the Kesh for bank robbery. You mention the name McCoy in this neighbourhood, people start walking away from you backwards" (21). Donna's warning that Frieda needs to be careful lest she get the family "a bad name" (22) emphasizes the family's deep identification with Republicanism. Yet, after Josie condescendingly encourages Frieda to spend as much time on her mind as on her hair and Frieda retaliates with "you went to university, but you still live in Andersonstown" (21), Josie is firm: "I live here because I choose to" (21). She vigorously defends her autonomy, rejecting her family's influence, even after choosing its cause.

But, in an example of Devlin's complexity of representation, Josie's opinions about family and tribal politics are contradictory. Such ambivalence becomes obvious when she interrogates Joe Conran about his reasons for choosing Irish Republicanism over his upper-class British cultural inheritance. While in the feminine environment of Donna's house, Josie asserts the primacy of her own agency in becoming a volunteer, and the questions she uses to expose Joe's motives imply that within the conflict, tribal

loyalty is fundamental. When Joe suggests she is being overly harsh in her questioning, she replies, "it's a bit like the Catholic church, Joe; easy if you were born in it, difficult if you try to convert" (47). His assertion that Josie seems "to object to the idea that a person can refuse to render back what their social conditioning will make of them" (47), suggests a fault, an ideological hiccup, in her self-conception: as Joe states, "the question of identity is very complex" (47). Josie's struggle with the competing dialogues of feminism and Republicanism/family loyalty create major tensions in her sense of self.

Here, Devlin once again emphasizes the strictly gendered nature of Republicanism. As Josie explains, her deceased mother "spent her life listening" (20); thus, her own decision to become an active volunteer seems partly based on her intense desire to avoid the traditional limitations placed upon IRA women, silence in particular. By identifying with her father, Josie attempts to transcend the socially inscribed limitation of her gender. Josie's desire to dislocate herself from the Republican tradition of passive, suffering women proves highly problematic; in her attempt to escape the shadow of Roisin Dubh, she rejects all of the aspects of her own identity that clash with the highly masculinized convention of the IRA volunteer. She effectively rejects one inscribed identity for another.

Her sexual relationship with Cathal illustrates her own binary understanding of gender. For Josie, Cathal's constantly pregnant wife represents passive, reproductive femininity: since he sleeps with both women, Josie feels compelled to create a divergent sexual identity for herself. As she explains to Donna, "sometimes when we make love I

pretend I'm someone else [...] Someone I make up – from another century. Sometimes I'm not even a woman. Sometimes I'm a man – his warrior lover, fighting side by side to the death. Sometimes we're not even on the same side" (17). She consciously masculinizes herself in order to avoid the subjugating implications that heterosexual sex can have upon women within the Republican mythic tradition.

Yet, when Josie speaks the language of Republicanism it is in conversation with the ideologies of her sisters. When she states "there are no personal differences between one person and another that are not political" (23), it is easy to imagine the same words being uttered by Raymond in *The Wrong Man.* Indeed, most of Josie's statements about the IRA are highly jargonistic. As Donna notes when Josie makes an ideologically loaded statement, "I'm looking at you but it's him who's talking" (16). While most of Raymond's propagandizing is enacted through lengthy internal monologues, safely out of the reach of Róisín's potentially contradictory responses, Josie's political rants exist *only* as an aspect of a dialogue. Whereas novels allow for all sorts of internalization and monologues, and film can impress us with Danny's motivation or Maggie's suffering through image alone, Devlin's text deliberately uses dialogue (and competing analogues) to articulate the complexities of identity politics in Northern Ireland.[4] Whenever Josie

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[4]In *Ourselves Alone*, discussions of an overtly political nature always take place as part of a conversation; however, both Josie and Donna engage in extended personal monologues. Interestingly, both Josie and Donna's monologues describe an instance of loss of self-determination as a result of experiences with an involved man.

talks about her political views, whenever she attempts to justify her position, her opinions are accepted, dismissed, or questioned by Frieda or Donna:

> Josie: Do you know what they did when they divided this country –
>
> Frieda: Oh, here we go again. Mystical alienation.
>
> Josie: They gave us political amnesia.
>
> Frieda: Jargon.
>
> Donna: (getting up) Would anyone like a drink? (23)[5]

Frieda, like Joe in *The Boxer*, is extremely intolerant of any mystification of "the troubles," and always responds to Josie's propaganda with contempt. Devlin explains:

> she is a kind of a comic voice that plays jokes at things that are regarded as very sacred in political terms [...] In the past I have always found it very interesting to put a traditional ironic point of view in one character and then bring another character to question that stance. I think that is really exciting. (Cerquoni 120)

Further, in setting Frieda and Josie in ideological opposition with each other, Devlin enacts something that is entirely absent from *The Boxer* and *The Wrong Man*: political discourse that is not framed in terms of masculinity versus femininity. By presenting Republican and anti-Republican ideas through the discussion of women, Devlin breaks

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[5]Even though the women often disagree with each other's opinions, they always let each other speak. While they may interrupt, they never talk over each other. Each woman's voice (or silence) forms an essential part of the conversation as a whole.

through convention, creating a space wherein identity cannot be reduced to simple biological gender difference.

While Donna's approach is slightly different from Josie's or Frieda's (like Maggie in *The Boxer*, Donna says more through silence than through words), her response is treated as an equally valid political statement. Devlin explains:

> I inherited a kind of word-culture, which was about arguments and debates in plays. I find that very hard to get out of – the person who speaks the most is the person who wins the argument – and that's a kind of very old traditional form of theatre. (108)

Devlin's treatment of Donna, the waiting wife, is one of the aspects of *Ourselves Alone* that most separates it from *The Boxer* and *The Wrong Man*; Devlin is adamant about the validity of Donna's political and personal agency. In *Ourselves Alone*, Donna proves that speaking can sometimes say less than silence. Donna is consistently presented as a figure of wisdom. Both Josie and Frieda turn to her for support, sometimes in the form of advice, but more often for loving female friendship. Significantly, Devlin's theatrical, multilogic form challenges a narrative construction of both *The Boxer* and *The Wrong Man*: while the women in *Ourselves Alone* deal with challenging life situations, they are not completely isolated or symbolically incarcerated like Maggie and Roisin. Female friendships, both supportive and challenging, play a major role in all three women's lives. When Frieda expresses her frustration about her lack of romantic prospects, complaining "Nobody seems to care what happens to me. If I died tomorrow – it would be no loss"

(34), Donna replies simply, "I care, Frieda" (34). She loves her friends selflessly, even when they are too concerned with their own problems to ask about hers. In a Republican context where "the only loyalties you are allowed are ideological" (22), Donna's actions can be construed as compelling political acts.

Viewed simply, the end of *Ourselves Alone* could seem bleak. Donna's role as wise listener could be read as a re-inscription of convention: it is not much of a leap from Donna to Róisín Dubh. After all, Donna has given up her family and her freedom for Liam, a man who seems concerned only with himself. She is as long-suffering and as hard done by as Maggie. Even without a significant public voice, Donna's compassionate leadership among female friends empowers her; however, Devlin's point is not that a woman's ideal role in the "Troubles" is as a selfless supporter. Once again, Devlin creates a highly ambiguous situation, rejecting the idea of a perfect solution in favour of a more complex, less idealized or stable reality. As Donna explains, near the end of *Ourselves Alone*:

> I think I have lost the capacity for happiness. I left my son for him [...] I lost my desire. I felt for the first time the course of things, the inevitability. And I thought, no, I won't struggle any more, I shall just do. And all that time – longing was wasted because life just turns things out as they are. Happiness, sadness, has nothing to do with it. (89)

When she finally talks about herself, it becomes clear that Donna's silence is simply her method of occupying a situation, not a perfect and universal mode of femininity. Donna's position, her firm acceptance of her situation, has not come easily.

By the conclusion of *Ourselves Alone*, Josie too finds herself forced to make a very difficult decision. After learning that Joe has betrayed her in both a political and a personal sense, she must navigate a situation without any obviously correct course of action. Josie's decision to keep her child, but raise it under her father's roof is probably the most critically contentious aspect of Devlin's plot. While *The Boxer* suggests that extricating Maggie's son from the grips of her IRA family is critical to any hope for a peaceful future, Devlin allows Malachy to step back into his role as domineering patriarch. Jozefina Komporaly suggests that Josie's re-acceptance of Malachy's authority,

> though in accordance with orthodox Catholicism, is an exclusive result of Josie's personal will, underpinned by her full awareness of the right to choose [...] While she accepts her father's protection, she again acts out of conviction rather than mere resignation, clearly refusing to re-live the life of her mother. (73)

While Komporaly's reading is compelling, I believe that Devlin's stage directions counter such an argument. During the scene where Malachy takes control over Josie's child, he puts his arm around her in a proprietary gesture, physically leading a wordless Josie from the room. Other commentators have noticed Josie's apparent loss of confidence, and have read her re-entrance into the family fold as a feminist failure. Chris Wood states

that Josie is the woman "most likely to make it out of Andersonstown, but Joe's betrayal leads to the dissolution of that hope [...] She finally gives in and allows Malachy to take her back to his house to stay" (302). Wood concludes that Malachy will take over the rearing of Josie's child, most likely raising "another martyr for the cause" (302). However, when Liam and Josie argue over to whom her child belongs, with Liam claiming "the father is a traitor. He did not love you; he used you. It's better that his baby should not be born at all" (87) and Josie counters "But its my baby – it doesn't matter about anything else" (87), Donna ends the debate stating "a child doesn't belong to anyone. It's itself" (87). Donna's assertion of autonomy is a particularly meaningful statement. Josie, Frieda, and Donna are all daughters of patriarchy, familial and cultural, but each possesses a distinctive and complex identity. All three women live in similar conditions within a highly restrictive family culture, yet all choose different modes of existence and resistance. *Ourselves Alone* champions the commitment to be oneself – against or within the hegemonic ideology of the play's community structure.

If patriarchal domination is accepted as the master narrative of the lives of Northern Irish women, then they are reduced to a suffering mass. Such generalizations altogether ignore the actual variety and richness of individual experience and identity. Even though the community of women is central to *Ourselves Alone*, with the women offering each other support, and friendship, Frieda, Josie, and Donna are all complex individuals. As the title of *Ourselves Alone* implies, their singular identities also deserve

recognition.[6] Frieda's ultimate decision to abandon Northern Ireland for a new start in England has not been popular with critics. Rea notes that while "Frieda vocally challenges masculine authority in her family and in the Andersonston community" (206), her move to England somehow diminishes her previous acts of self-determination. Rea concludes that "beyond her own escape, Frieda's challenge to patriarchy is ineffective" (206). Rea suggests that since Frieda's acts do not enact broad change they are underwhelming. I disagree. Frieda is a battered woman leaving a sometimes abusive, always dismissive lover. While she emphasizes that she is not leaving Ireland to escape the manipulative and violent John McDermott, saying, "Oh, it's not him; it is Ireland I am leaving" (90), the man is a metaphor for the nation. When Frieda asserts, "Please don't try to make out there's something wrong with me because I won't treat this as normal" (81), she is talking about the brick with a sectarian note attached that has just been hurled through the window just as much as she is talking about McDermott's violence. Her move to England is for survival, and should be allowed to stand uncriticized. While it would be inspiring for Frieda to dedicate her life to improving the situation of women in Northern Ireland, she is not responsible for that; she must take care of her individual needs first and foremost.

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[6]Here, Devlin's decision to name her play *Ourselves Alone*, the English translation of Sinn Fein, is relevant. The title emphasizes that women can be *ourselves*, part of a community (Republican, female, etc.), but must also exist *alone*, as autonomous individuals.

Therein lies one of the strengths of Devlin's play. In her attempt to question the one-dimensionality of the IRA wife or lover in either a literary or Republican tradition, Devlin does not create an equally monolithic feminist symbol, a super-woman single-handedly determined to fix all of Northern Ireland's gender troubles. Frieda realizes she is not living the life she wants, and decides to take the highly personal steps that she believes might lead to a brighter future for herself. In *Ourselves Alone*, Devlin urges her audience to realize the multiplicity of the issues facing her women: Northern Irish female identity cannot be reduced to a purely Troubles-based model of incarceration and victimhood. In *Women in Northern Ireland: Cultural Studies and Material Conditions*, Megan Sullivan states that women in Northern Ireland "do not name the troubles as their only concern. Indeed, many women recognize that their lives will remain substantially unchanged after 'the war' unless their material needs are considered" (168). While a character like Maggie in *The Boxer* exists only in terms of her position within the troubles, Devlin's female identities are informed by much broader circumstances. Frieda, Josie, and Donna are not symbolic women; rather, they are complex individuals. Frieda's move to London, Josie's decision to keep her child, and Donna's deep self-knowledge and acceptance are all self-determining, but potentially flawed, acts. Devlin does not solve her female characters' problems by relying upon Republican conventions of femininity: if anything, the complexity of their situations, the rejection of a model identity, increases the difficulty of their lives. Devlin's characterization moves them beyond mere victimization: unlike Maggie or Róisín, the women of *Ourselves Alone* are

vocal individuals capable of questioning and affecting their circumstances. Their endings may be pessimistic or problematic but the power of their voices and their silences separate Frieda, Josie and Donna from other conventionalized characters.

Conclusion

The character of the imprisoned IRA wife is a narrative convention in contemporary Northern Irish "Troubles" literature, film, and theatre. While she displays some characteristics of the conventional symbolic women of Republican literary tradition, her contemporary situation also renders her different. The three texts I consider challenge some conventions and reaffirm others. Repeatedly, it is the characteristic of passivity that is challenged or affirmed. Passivity and its opposite – agency – become flashpoints of narrative construction in the texts discussed. If the IRA wife ends up passive then she is also imprisoned, not unlike her husband or IRA lover. If the IRA wife achieves an element of agency, then she is often exiled or abandoned. But as I have argued, in the film, literature and theatre of Northern Ireland, the IRA wife is a recurring character without a completely fixed identity or function.

In Chapter 1 about *The Boxer*, I state that while IRA wife Maggie initially exhibits many traditional qualities of Republican femininity (loyalty, passivity, and noble suffering), the film's conclusion reveals the destructive potential of those qualities. Loyalty to the IRA, or to the imprisoned husband she never loved, is replaced by a new sort of commitment: loyalty to self, and accordingly, loyalty to love. In the film, Maggie's transformation from a passive acceptance of her own and her community's restricted situation to a rebellious confrontation of the rules emphasizes that active resistance is essential to the future of Northern Ireland. The imprisoned IRA wife

becomes a metaphorical method whereby director Jim Sheridan interpellates a larger group: Northern Irish citizens tired of sectarian bullying. Sheridan uses the IRA wife to suggest that oppressed people must stand up for what they believe in, rather than accepting the limitations placed upon them by ongoing violence and intimidation. The ending of the film, with its ambiguous future for Maggie and her family, speaks to the unpredictable outcome (and possible exile) for those who resist.

Róisín, Danny Morrison's imprisoned IRA wife in *The Wrong Man*, works in the opposite direction in terms of female agency. Like Maggie, Róisín undergoes a transformation, but instead of moving from passivity to activity as Maggie does, she degenerates from a confident character with positive characteristics (independence, assertiveness, and tenacity) into an unflattering, caricature of a feminist: aggressive, irrational, and unfeminine. In resisting the gender expectations of her position as an IRA wife, Róisín's personal desires compromise an ideologically based concept of "the common good." While she wants a stable family atmosphere, an education, and a nice house, Morrison's narrator suggests that what Róisín really ought to desire is a Northern Ireland free of the imperial influence of England. By confronting Raymond with the hesitations, both personal and moral, that she has about his involvement in the IRA, Róisín becomes the "wrong woman," and an example of what an IRA wife should not be. Her criticism of and unhappiness with their life is framed in terms of betrayal, not just of Raymond, but of her nation. The ideology of *The Wrong Man* asserts that the quiet suffering of the IRA wife is essential to the success of IRA operations: Róisín's

"selfishness" is the ultimate threat to the Republican project. The analyses in Chapters 1 and 2 thus establishes two opposing characterizations of the IRA wife.

It is in Chapter 3, with my discussion of Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* that a third space of characterization opens up. Devlin's imprisoned IRA women differ greatly from those of Sheridan and Morrison. These women are fundamentally complex. Even though both Maggie and Roisin challenge certain stereotypes and conventions about IRA wives and girlfriends, they never escape the apparently perennial position of women in Northern Irish literature: their functions may have changed, but they are still highly symbolic women. While Maggie and Roisin are individual characters meant to represent larger groups, Devlin's characters refuse metaphoric status, mainly due to Devlin's refusal to universalize. Frieda, Josie, and Donna are diverse women, each making different decisions about how to live within the bounds of a highly patriarchal Republican movement. While Devlin's female protagonists are all faced with difficult and varying circumstances, one thing they have in common is that none are passive victims. They make conscious choices for themselves, basing decisions on their often complex or contradictory experiences rather than conventional expectation.

At the outset of my thesis, I posed two questions: who is the IRA wife?, and does her characterization and function differ depending on the narrative in which she exists? It is difficult to answer the first question because, as my three primary texts indicate, the identity of the IRA wife is quite dynamic. She can be an initially passive character, driven to action like Maggie, a vengeful aggressor (eventually, and essentially defeated)

like Róisín, or complex and difficult to place like Frieda, Josie, and Donna. The answer to the second question is an emphatic yes. Each of my three primary text uses different mediums to represent the imprisoned IRA wife, furthering divergent agendas and ideologies. In Sheridan's film, the intense visual potential of the medium emphasizes the impetus for community activism. Conversely, the novel, as executed by Danny Morrison, emerges as a limiting space, yet another incarcerating location. Finally, Devlin's play fully engages the multilogic nature of the theatrical form to challenge the authority of hegemonic structures. Whatever her function within a text, the IRA wife's specific existence and circumstances in turn clarifies, complicates, and questions existing conventions and expectations of Northern Irish female identity.

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